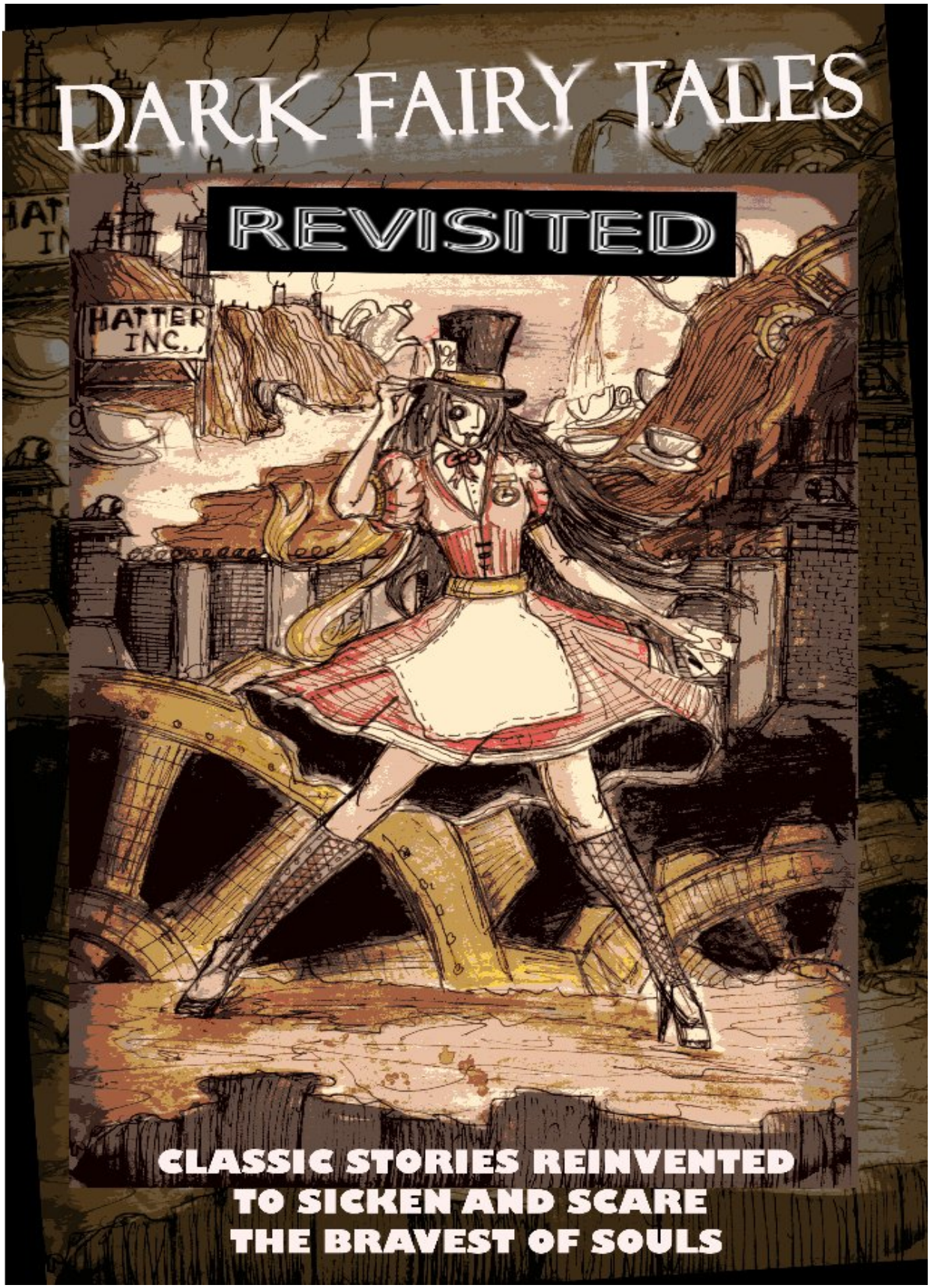
DARK FAIRY TALES

REVISITED

CLASSIC STORIES REINVENTED
TO SICKEN AND SCARE
THE BRAVEST OF SOULS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HATTER INC.
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THE BRAVEST OF SOULS

DARK FAIRY TALES REVISITED

An Anthology of Dark Fairy Tales

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FOREWORD

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We hope you enjoy this blood-curdling collection of twisted and terrifying tales, and feel free to check out more titles from Thirteen Press & Horrified Press in the future.

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LITTLE DEAD RIDING HOOD

Christofer Nigro

Once upon a time, there lived a young girl who was absolutely adored by her grandmother. As a gift, her grandmother knitted her a red cap, and so enamored of this (obviously expensive) gift was the girl, that she wore it at all times, so that from then on everyone called her Little Red-Cap. This was rather fortuitous, since the girl was so ignored by almost everyone in her tiny hamlet that no one seemed to remember her real name anyway.

Little Red-Cap loved her grandmother in turn, particularly since the old woman was quite generous from a financial standpoint, giving her granddaughter several coins every time she visited. The last time, she had given her granddaughter enough coins to afford a red hooded vestment that the girl wore any time she went out, as it matched her red cap. Unsurprisingly, some people then began calling the lass Little Red Riding Hood, as if one nickname based entirely on the color of her attire wasn't enough.

One day, Little Red-Cap's mother bade her daughter to trek through the woods over a yonder knoll to bring her grandmother a few gifts, specifically a cake and a bottle of wine. Little Red-Cap was only too happy to oblige, as she knew her grandmother was quite a lush, and would be so grateful for another opportunity to inebriate herself that she would likely give her granddaughter many coins extra. And Little Red-Cap could certainly use those coins, as she was desirous of purchasing a pair of beautifully sewn red gloves that would match her similarly colored cap and hooded garment. She surmised that after making the above planned purchase, she would then likely end up with a third nickname, Little Red Gloves, but by now she had learned not to be picky about what people called her, just so long as they acknowledged her existence.

"Now, remember, my darling Red-Cap," her mother firmly reminded her as she was about to send her daughter out on her errand. "Your grandmother is quite ill, so she will truly appreciate this cake I made for her, as well as this bottle of wine to numb all of her concerns."

"Mother, that wine will be her *sole* concern, trust my words," Red-Cap replied, and the mother and daughter enjoyed a hearty and boisterous laugh together.

“Ah, my little dumpling, your sense of humor is as dry as a worm that has laid on the ground for hours on a hot summer’s day.”

“Tee hee.”

“Now, let me give you another important reminder.”

“What would that be, Mother?”

“When you travel towards your grandmother’s house over the yonder knoll, please do not stray from the public path. The surrounding woods offer too many distractions for a girl like you.”

“Heh heh, of course not, dear Mother.”

“And even more importantly, if that should happen, your grandmother would be deprived of her wine, and lose the many hours of drunken solace it would bring her.”

“I duly perish the thought of depriving grandmother the source of her addiction, Mother.”

“That’s my girl. Should she be in a drunken stupor when you arrive, simply shake her until she makes some sort of sound to indicate that she is yet alive, then provide the good news that you have brought her more of her sacred elixir. After all, one as advanced in years as your grandmother must surely indulge whatever pleasures they can, considering how many others are no longer an option for them. But please don’t ask me to explain that in further detail, or I will be forced to lie.”

“Worry not, dear Mother, I prefer blissful ignorance any day of the year.” Little Red-Cap hoped her mother failed to notice the wry, mischievous grin on her face that accompanied her statement.

“Of course,” her mother continued with the utmost seriousness, “there is also that other reason why you are not to stray too far from the path and into the woods. You do not want to happen upon one of those unfortunate souls who are said to have been subject to that. . . awful affliction.”

“You do mean the walking dead, is that right, Mother?”

“My god! How did you come by such ghastly information?”

“Um, word of that nature tends to get around, Mother. And I am most certainly not as sheltered as you wish to believe, if I may be so frank as to burst your bubble of comfort.”

“I see. Well, just in case there is any truth to those tales, please be sure not to stray from the direct path to your grandmother’s house.”

“Why, of course not, Mother. I am not the sort of girl to disobey her wise old elders.”

“Wise *older* elders, my dear girl, at least in my case, for it is not as if I am actually old.”

“Whatever you must believe to get you through the evening, Mother dearest.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘I most certainly do believe you are as young as a single evening, Mother dearest.’”

“Hmf. Very well, my ears must have incurred a build up of wax again. I’ll have you clean them for me when you return from your errand.”

“Erm, I will most certainly make haste to return home for such an important task, Mother. May I be off now?”

Little Red-Cap’s mother didn’t appear to notice the rather uncouth gesture the young girl made with a certain finger on her right hand as she left their home and began merrily skipping towards the cottage of her kindly —and oh so fiscally generous—grandmother.

****

As Little Red-Cap strode gleefully down the path leading to her grandmother’s house, her thoughts focused on imagining how many coins her grandmother would give her this time, as well as what she heard about the bizarre and horrific flesh-rotting infection that had begun sweeping across the countryside. Different versions of the story reached her ears, but the most widely accepted tale originating at the local pub she routinely visited to hear the latest gossip about who in the village environs was the cheapest miser, or who was sharing a bed with whom on any given month, was the following:

A few weeks past, the local Huntsman shot an unusual animal in the woods, one of the many who appeared to share human and animal characteristics, which had begun appearing in the area over the past few years. This one seemed to resemble a large human wearing the coat and rough form of a canine, and having no idea what else to do with the odd carcass, the Hunstman cut the creature up and sold its meat to the local butcher. The butcher then sold the meat to his usual customers at regular market value. Soon after this came the reports that those who had consumed this meat were becoming afflicted with a strange illness where they would quickly die after vomiting uncontrollably for several minutes, only to rise

up again as a walking corpse. These walking corpses displayed no trace of the human personality they once possessed, and began attacking living humans with the intent of devouring their flesh. Those who were bitten but not eaten would soon prove tainted with the nightmarish affliction themselves, and they in turn died to rise again as shambling man-eating corpses. Being already dead though still animate, these walking corpses proved all but impossible to dispatch when any type of normally deadly force was used against them, until it was discovered by one lucky farmer that they ceased all animation and further predations when their heads were destroyed.

The village doctor surmised that even corpses need brains to function, despite apparently not needing any of their other organs to be in working condition for them to pursue their flesh-eating ways. Their lust for living human flesh proved insatiable, and the local law had declared an emergency amidst the surrounding areas, with the sheriff deputizing bands of hunters to do their best to help contain the roving corpses, and prevent them from spreading their taint to outlying areas. The local doctors of these scattered bucolic regions were baffled as to what could be causing this dreadful contagion, but they had little doubt that something in the blood or meat of the strange 'manimal' who was butchered for human consumption was the culprit. Exactly what the meat or blood contained to initiate this horrific rotting disease had left the doctors stymied thus far, but they decreed they would continue to work diligently on identifying and isolating the cause. In the meantime, they said, all hunters in the surrounding areas needed to avoid selling any manimals they may kill to the butcher shops, and were to immediately cremate all such kills.

How delightfully enthralling! Little Red-Cap thought to herself with her characteristically sardonic grin, as her recollection of the sordid events she heard took a bite out of the tediously mundane nature of her everyday life– *pun very much intended*, she thought to herself. *Tee hee*.

****

While cheerfully skipping down the path leading to her grandmother's house, Little Red Cap suddenly noticed the presence of a figure standing several feet to her right in the woods. Stepping out of the brush and into clear view was a Wolf who by means of appearance, intelligence, and

ability for speech made obvious that he was once a human. Those who practiced the old magicks and learned the art of shape shifting or "skin-walking" had taken up the means and desire to partially wear the forms of animals, and to live as such in the deep woods away from a native civilization they detested. Of course, though retaining their human intellect and mannerisms, their personalities became merged with the natural instincts and temperament of whatever animal-form they chose to clothe themselves within. However, Little Red-Cap was a bold girl who was unaware of the inherent wickedness of the manimal she now found herself in the midst of, so she feared him not.

"Whither you go, little one in red?" the Wolf asked, his maw beginning to salivate at the tasty sight before him. "I am certain I have seen you out and about before, but I do not recall your name."

"No worries, my given name is hardly at the forefront of anyone's knowledge hereabouts," she replied. "Just call me 'Little Red-Cap,' or 'Little Red Riding Hood,' or even 'Little One in Red,' if you must. As for my destination, I am off to my grandmother's house, for she is ill, and I am taking to her cake and wine to make her stronger."

"Is that so? Would you mind some company?"

"No, not at all, as I would enjoy a companion to discuss the thrillingly horrible gossip now spreading throughout the country."

Walking beside the scarlet-attired girl on the main path, taking care not to alarm her with a revelation of his true intentions, as he was mindful of how many local humans would hear her resulting screams on this public road, the man-wolf decided to resort to the new science of psychology that he was studying to lead her away from public view.

What a tender morsel this young one would make for my eagerly awaiting gullet, the Wolf mused to himself while forcing himself not to salivate at the thought. *A much more succulent meal than the old woman of whom she speaks, who would provide more bones than flesh. This plump little creature, on the other hand…*

"Please do tell me the thrilling gossip you say you have heard," the Wolf entreated with as close to a smile as his extended muzzle would allow him to simulate. "But only after you tell me where your grandmother lives, just to sate my hung—er, curiosity."

"My grandmother lives about a quarter of a league yonder, right near the grove of oak trees, with the nut trees just below them," Little Red-Cap

replied with seeming innocence. “May I inform you of the gossip now?”

“Yes, of course,” the Wolf said, his long and powerful canine muzzle again unable to form a smile to betray his satisfaction that the girl revealed the location of her grandmother’s residence to him.

“According to this gossip, there are walking corpses about!” Little Red-Cap exclaimed with a tone of morbid glee. “They are people who rise up after death and seek out the flesh of still-living folks. Quite horrible, wouldn’t you say?”

“Truly horrible indeed,” the Wolf agreed.

Hmmm, it would appear that someone has eaten one of my fellow shape-shifters, one whose blood and sinews underwent the rare change that can spread the rot-bearing contagion to humans should they consume it, the Wolf noted to himself. *This may bode ill for all who dwell hereabouts, including yours truly and the other shape-shifters who live several leagues distant in the wilderness. It would be wise to take my intended meal and leave this area with haste. Accordingly, I had best get to carrying out the plan my mind is now crafting to make this sumptuous little wretch in red my dinner.*

Evincing a devilish grin at her new companion, Little Red-Cap mischievously decreed, “Let’s stray from the path and see what new gossip about this exciting news we can find!”

Suddenly, the Wolf realized that this was the perfect opportunity for him to carry out his plan by reaching the grandmother’s house before Little Red-Cap could do so.

“That sounds like it would be a merry time indeed, young miss, but I must get along and…prepare for dinner. So please do feel free to go on without me.”

The young girl in red frowned slightly upon hearing of her new friend’s impending departure from her company. “Very well, but you are most certainly going to miss out on lots of fun.”

“That may be so, little lass, but I must dispense with the fun to satisfy my culinary requirements. Good day to you, I am certain we shall meet again before too long.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I would bet my last coin on it, young lady.”

With that said, the Wolf licked his padded lips and continued down the same path, his impressive speed quickly taking him out of Little Red-Cap’s

line of sight. Shrugging, she then strayed from the main path and into the nearby woods (precisely as her mother told her not to do, mind you), hoping to salvage a bit of excitement before her imminent visit with her grandmother.

She was, alas, destined to find much more excitement than she could ever have bargained for.

****

Striding into the woods in search of another fellow country inhabitant to share the exciting news with, the girl with the matching red cap and hooded garment spotted a local farmer whose cheerful smile she was well familiar with. The man stood quietly with his back to her, seeming to tremble slightly as he looked at the sheep grazing amongst the fields. His long shock of white hair draped over his shoulders much as Little Red-Cap remembered it from her earliest days, his gray shirt and denim pants held up by the thick suspenders that he always seemed to wear when working his fields, all appearing as grimy as always. She looked forward to seeing his charming smile as she told him about the interesting events going on in the surrounding areas, while lamenting how excitement never seems to make its way to their moribund little hamlet. She excitedly approached the farmer and tapped him on his shoulder.

"Peek-a-boo, I snuck up on you, tee hee!" she squealed with delight upon catching her old friend unawares.

The farmer turned to look at who had tapped him, and Little Red-Cap was distressed to see that the man's skin was unusually pale and swarthy, something that the girl was unprepared for despite the fact that this farmer was advanced in years. His eyes seemed unusually glassy, as if staring at nothing despite looking very clearly at her, and the liver spots on his face and neck appeared darker and much more pronounced than ever before, as if indicative of something more than merely aging skin.

"Old Farmer Brown, you look rather unwell," she remarked with curiosity. "Is something ailing you?"

At first opening his mouth as if to respond, Old Farmer Brown startled and sickened the red-clad girl by vomiting what appeared to be a quick upchuck of blackish bile on her immaculately shined shoes (which were now immaculate no longer, of course). He then opened his mouth and

uttered what appeared to be a low moaning sound, as if a combination of agony and delight had suddenly seized him. No sooner had that haunting sound left the decaying farmer's scabrous lips than he reached out for the red-clad girl with a ravenous expression on his now ghoulish features, his rotten teeth and drying tongue slavering for the flesh before him.

"Oh my heavens!" Little Red-Cap shouted in terror. "The rotting disease has spread near me! You're infected!"

Quickly grabbing the girl around each of her arms and squeezing with a terrible display of strength, the Corpse-Formerly-Known-As-Old-Farmer-Brown moved his face down towards the girl's throat, more bile streaming from his open mouth as he prepared to feast. Reacting quickly, Little Red-Cap reached for the wine bottle in her apron and struck the rotted farmer in the side of his head, cracking his skull and driving bits of bone into his brain matter. Darkish fluid that was once human blood poured out of the resulting wound. The suspender-wearing zombie staggered as several fragments of bone pierced his brain, and his grip on the girl slackened just enough for her to pull away from his deadly grip, courtesy of the sudden surge of adrenaline now coursing through her veins. Little Red-Cap attempted to run back towards the path leading to their grandmother's house with as much speed as she could muster, but unfortunately her great haste led to carelessness, and she tripped on a large rock laying near her feet. She landed on her chest and almost had the wind knocked out of her in the process.

The swaggering ravenous corpse who had once been kindly Old Farmer Brown stumbled to the ground beside the fallen girl's legs, determined to get a bite of the flesh his inhuman hunger now so voraciously craved. Grabbing the girl's chunky right leg while she was still a bit stunned, the elderly-man-turned-corpse took a bite. Yelping in extreme pain, Little Red-Cap again moved quickly, grabbing the heavy rock she had tripped on and proceeded to bash the zombie on the skull with it. Seeing the dreadful creature gag and cough up the piece of flesh he managed to tear from her leg upon his skull being partially caved in by the blow, the girl forced herself to blank out the pain and jump back to her feet. Upon doing so, acting on pure adrenaline borne of a desperate desire for self-preservation, she repeatedly pounded the animated cadaver on his skull, literally smashing his brains to a grayish mush which resembled regurgitated porridge.

“Bad Old Farmer Brown!” she cried over and over again as she was crushing the old zombie’s head with repeated blows of the rock. Following the fifth such blow, the creature ceased all animation, and the several successive blows were simply a matter of the red-capped girl venting her anger and shock (and somehow, that red cap of hers never seemed to fall off her own skull during the entire conflagration).

Upon completion of the gory actions, she dropped the goo-encrusted rock and put her hand over the painful bite in her calf.

“Owie,” she said to herself quietly.

It was then that she heard further moaning sounds emanating from the nearby woods on the opposite side of the field where the sheep were lazily and peacefully grazing, and she could make out a few figures within the distant foliage moving with the same shambling gait displayed by the thing that was once Old Farmer Brown.

“Oh dear,” she said to herself. “More of the walking dead are coming my way, and I am too far to make it back home quickly. I need to get to grandmother’s house, for I shall be safe there while she tends to my leg. I am certain she will give me some extra coins this time once she sees what a brave girl I am.”

Still ignoring the throbbing pain in her right leg, Little Red-Cap quickly made her way back to the path, and resumed her trek to grandmother’s house. After walking another several yards up the path, she noticed an odd tingling warmth course through her body as she proceeded apace, followed by a strong urge to vomit. *It must be the shock of the encounter upsetting my tummy,* she assured herself as she proceeded to violently upchuck dark bodily fluids upon the path.

****

A short while later, Little Red-Cap arrived at her grandmother’s house, staggering in the front door in a manner where one could easily mistake her for a girl afflicted with rickets. Now feeling hungrier than ever before in her life (if such a word is now apropos), she hoped her grandma would provide a good snack for her (as always) as she opened the door and let herself in. *Just like Grandma to be the trusting sort and leave her door unlocked,* the red-clothed girl thought to herself while shaking her head.

Walking through the house on unsteady legs towards her grandmother's bedroom, where she obviously realized the ill old woman would most likely be, Little Red-Cap noticed a figure dressed in a familiar gown with an equally familiar bonnet covering much of its head lying under the covers of the bed.

"My, what big eyes you have, Grandma," the girl said with a somewhat scratchy voice.

"Why, the better to see you with, my dear—er, why does your skin now have such a grayish cast about it, and why are your eyes so covered with milky film, child?" the Wolf asked while doing his best to imitate an old woman's voice through his not-exactly-human larynx.

"Well, I had quite an eventful day, Grandma, and I would imagine it shows," the girl replied.

Unable to hold back his hunger any longer, the Wolf leapt from the bed with animalistic agility and seized the young girl in his huge, hairy fingers.

"Surprise!" he shouted as he bared his razor sharp teeth, ready to indulge in his long-awaited meal.

But it quickly turned out that he was to receive a most unpleasant surprise of his own, as instead of Little Red-Cap screaming in horror as he expected, she instead took the initiative and sunk her teeth into his hirsute shoulder and ripped out a large chunk of hair-covered flesh, causing the man-beast to drop her after emitting a dog-like whine of shock and agony. The now no longer living girl greedily chewed and gulped down the bloody gob of fur-covered tissue with great delight, trickles of blood running down her now ruby red lips.

"Mmmmm," she said aloud with great pleasure permeating her tone of voice. "I never tasted wolf meat before! I must have more!"

Growling in bemusement, the Wolf howled, "By the sacred jaws of Fenris, you are infected with the rot contagion!"

"I guess I am," she said as she smiled with bits of the Wolf's flesh, hair, and blood streaming from her mouth and covering her teeth.

Bellowing a howl of rage, the werewolf slashed the girl in the face with his knife-like claws, rending the flesh of her now gray cheek. Though her skin was sliced open and darkish ichors flowed outwards, she seemed otherwise unfazed by the blow.

“More meat!” she yelled as she bent down and sunk her teeth into the Wolf’s leg, ripping out another chunk of hairy flesh.

Again howling in pain, the Wolf grabbed the girl by the throat and used his tremendous lupine strength to effortlessly lift her nearly seven feet off the ground. He then began slamming her body into the wall repeatedly with all his superhuman might, an action he continued until her undead body went limp from the unrelenting impact.

She must be destroyed quickly! he noted to himself with more than a small touch of alarm. *And even though she is now actually dead, I am too hungry to dispose of her any way other than as originally intended, but I had best do it before she rots too much and ceases to be palatable as a meal.*

Hoping to kill two birds with a single proverbial stone, the Wolf quickly devoured the dead but animated girl in a single gulp while she was still too stunned to take another bite out of him.

Satisfied for a moment, the Wolf licked his chops with his long, spade-like tongue. But just as he considered himself satiated, he suddenly bent over as a sharp pain cut through his lower abdomen.

“Garr!” the lycanthropic malcontent exclaimed. “The girl remains animate within me, and she is…chewing her way out! But I shall resist, for my ability to regenerate injuries is formidable, and I will heal faster than she can-”

But before the lupine forest predator could finish that sentence, his chest exploded outward as a round of silver buckshot blasted him from behind. Taking one last mournful look at his rib cage protruding from the gaping hole in his torso, he fell backwards, dead before he hit the floor. Wounds caused by silver did not tend to heal so well for his lot, unfortunately.

“Hah!” the Huntsman shouted triumphantly from the open window. “I am glad to have tracked you here, you old sinner, for I have long sought you amongst all the other man-animals inhabiting these woods! Your vile depredations on the human population had to end, and now I have ended them!”

Crawling in through the window to examine the deadly creature he had finally managed to successfully dispatch, the Huntsman was startled when he spotted movement coupled with a strange chewing sound emanating from the slain beast’s furry belly. Seconds later, the outer skin of

the stomach tore open, and a small, grayish-skinned hand poking out of the sleeve of a red-hued garment pushed forcefully through the manimal's gastric walls. A few seconds after that, a strangely pallid young girl with a red cap on her head stood up from the now open digestive tract of the man-wolf, blood and digestive fluids streaming off of her petite form.

"Dear God, the creature must have swallowed that girl just before I shot him!" the Huntsman hollered while simultaneously astounded and vilified. "And she actually managed to claw her way out of his belly! It is very fortunate that I found the beast when I did! Here, girl, let me help you and check to insure that you are all right."

As the concerned Huntsman reached for Little Red-Cap, she responded to his generosity by biting off the middle finger of his hand. He screamed in agony and terror as he dropped his rifle and fell back against the wall of the room. A small but intense fountain of blood spurted before his horrified eyes from the gaping little stump where his finger was once attached.

The now dead but quite hungry Little Red-Cap munched away on the severed finger, noting to herself that human bone was surprisingly easy to bite through when one is willing to put the effort into it. *A lot less hair to get stuck between my teeth and tickle my gums than the Wolf's flesh too*, she noted to herself as she continued to chew her succulent little repast. *Hopefully I won't have to floss as much now.*

****

A short while later, Grandma strode up to the front door of her cottage. As she reached for the doorknob, she was a bit surprised to see it first opened by her young granddaughter, whose skin looked unusually gray and pallid. At her side was a tall bearded man with equally pale skin and a blood-soaked rag covering his right hand, a man whom she quickly recognized as the local Huntsman.

"My Little Red-Cap, whatever happened?" she asked. "I was feeling better so I went for a stroll…"

"Oh, it's nothing, Grandma," the girl said with a smile. "A wolf got in here while you were out, and he attacked me when I arrived to visit, but our valiant Huntsman arrived in time to save me."

“No wonder you both look so pale!” the elderly lady replied with a considerable amount of grandmotherly concern. “Oh, you poor dears, please let me go inside and provide the two of you a fine meal.”

“That would be wonderful, Grandma,” Little Red-Cap said with another toothy yellow smile and a sparkle in her milky eye. “My new companion and I would be more than happy to have you for dinner tonight.”

HANSEL AND GRETEL AND THE FAERIE

Aaron Stueve

Hansel was a fat boy, a fat, fat boy. Oddly, he didn't have a perpetually grumbling stomach or a pounding bully's fist. He was pleasant (for a mortal boy), intelligent (for a mortal boy), and jovial, but not in that way that makes you want to pummel a person. He was almost like a plump little sprite. A bit meek perhaps, but nevertheless an entertaining fat fellow . . . who also looked delicious.

His sister, Gretel, on the other hand, was not at all fat. She was, in fact, a wisp of a girl with hair like soft straw and skin so pale if you strained long enough, and squinted your eyes tight-like, you could almost see through to her innards. She was also pleasant and also would have made a good meal– not a great one, mind you, but a good one.

That's not the point though. The point is, barring Hansel's propensity for gluttony and no shortness of cowardice, the two children were the best any mortal parents could ask for. Knowing this, I'm sure you will think the following conversation their parents had one morning just as surprising and disturbing as Hansel and Gretel did:

"You know, Gerty, those children of ours can sure be a handful."

"Those children of *yours,* dear."

Raynard Grossmier, a genteel man more at home in the wilderness amongst the animals and trees than around other people, was Hansel and Gretel's father. Gerty, the woman he married directly after his first wife died under mysterious circumstances, whose name is unimportant here, though we'll call her Gerty since Gerty is her name, was—obviously at this point—their stepmother.

Gerty was not what you would call *mean* to her stepchildren. Considering how much she actually despised them, Gerty was an absolute angel up to the day of the conversation that continued as such:

"Yes, those children of *mine.* Still, their presence here affects both of us."

Gerty only nodded at this as she cut some arbitrary vegetable on the countertop in the kitchen.

"I'm only saying that maybe we'd be better off if they were gone too."

"Like your first wife?"

“Like my old life.”

“Interesting idea. We’d definitely have more money to bring a new baby into the world. Also, if they were dead we wouldn’t have to worry about them.”

Upon hearing this, Hansel broke down into tears that broke further down into wails that finally landed in a sack full of impassioned, slightly mad, screams. Gretel, on the other hand, folded into herself like a dying flower and sat there, in the dirt, in a dress of rags. Her eyes focused on the path in the woods leading away from their cabin and into the forest, the great open world, and whatever lay beyond, and she had a thought. It wasn’t a new thought. No, Gretel had often stared down that path, a path she would never have dreamed of actually taking, a path she had only ever seen her father take, a path that would surely lead to her demise for, as her father had often told her, fae live there.

But Gretel wanted out. Up until the moment she heard her parents discussing this desire to be rid of their children she had no overt feelings of hate for them. She simply had always wanted more.

“Too many books,” her father had often said.

“Not enough work,” her stepmother usually added. It was the story of her life and it was a story in a book she was ready to close.

“Everything okay out here?” Their father poked his head out the open window and smiled down at his children.

Gretel nodded.

Hansel looked up dumbly. Tears trickled down his fat cheeks like rushing spring thaw down bulbous, blotchy mountains.

Their father offered a smile both children knew was a lie. When he returned to the kitchen he shut the window and locked it. His voice was now muffled.

“We’re leaving,” Gretel told her brother as the sun beat down on them.

“But the fae—”

“Won’t kill us any faster than they will.” She pointed a dirty thumb at the window.

Hansel wiped his nose and repeated the word, “Leaving,” like it was a mantra. After half-a-dozen times he had gained some form of weak resolve. “Where will we go?”

Gretel shrugged and pointed at the path. “That way.”

“We’ll need food and supplies if we’re leaving.”

“We’ll get them tonight. They won’t try to get rid of us all that quickly. They’ll have to make a plan. They may even change their minds.”

“It’ll be too late if we’re already gone.”

“Too late for them.”

The children concocted the best plan they could, and it was actually quite a remarkable plan considering their ages and the shock to their respective systems. They tried to avoid their parents for the rest of the day and into the night. At bedtime they waited, side-by-side in the bed they shared, a bed Gretel had often wondered about splitting in two. It wasn’t that she hated her brother. She loved him immensely, more so now that she had found out her parents despised them both. It was just that her brother was big for a 9-year-old and he took up so much room and he cried a lot and she wanted some privacy every once in a while, privacy she could never get with Hansel hovering around her all hours of the day and even sleeping with her at night. Tonight though, as they lie, side-by-side, in the bed for the last time, Gretel took her brother in her arms and squeezed him tight.

“Be brave,” she said and released him. Then the two rose, dressed, gathered their supplies, and made their way into the big, bad world.

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The night was dark, as nights are prone to be, and the woods were infested with sounds that sent chills through our two little protagonists’ bones. They made their way slowly, cautiously. Neither of these children were going to do anything stupid like run off alone into the darkness or bring up some past argument that could lead to a new one and draw the attention of creatures like me or cause them to split up in angry huffs. No. These two children were smart, smarter in fact that many mortal adults I’ve had the displeasure to have known, and far more intelligent than their father.

They didn’t even talk much, nor did they remind each other they were scared. They simply walked. Gretel, her face set in a stern expression as though determination was the only emotion she was feeling, led the way. Hansel, pulling crumbs from bread he had brought and letting them fall behind him, followed.

There was a small part of Hansel that thought they had already done something stupid and there was no way their parents would actually want to

kill them despite what they had heard. Gretel and he must have misunderstood what had taken place in the kitchen earlier. Having these thoughts deep in his mind, Hansel had devised his own plan. The crumbs could do one of two things, he thought. One: they could lead him back home (the woods were a very confusing and frightening place, especially for a boy of Hansel's cowardice) or two: lead their parents to them if this was all the big misunderstanding he thought it might be.

Well, the story goes that these two intelligent children, despite their intelligence, found themselves exceedingly lost in the woods at night. Though they had taken the path they often saw their father take, the end of the forest they knew was out there somewhere, was actually and in fact nowhere. Somehow, they had lost their way. Fear slipped through Gretel's resolve and completely moved into Hansel's (which, as explained earlier, was never near as strong as Gretel's). Resolve is a strange thing though, when it is as severe as Gretel's was. She soldiered through the woods, fighting back her fear, ushering her brother along with the stern calm of a loving mother.

Hansel, bless his soul, left his trail of breadcrumbs.

And the night crept on. The shadows grew and surrounded the young siblings like the monsters the children thought they were. But they weren't monsters. They weren't even fae. They were merely shadows and they didn't mean to help Hansel and Gretel lose themselves in the twists and turns of the forest crowded with trees and plants and all things animalistic and ancient. That, however, does not excuse them from their guilt in this tale. For, had the shadows had the piece of mind to disappear and leave the forest a warm, open place, Hansel and Gretel would have never wandered to my dark, secret place. It is ironic to know that unbeknownst to Hansel, Gretel, or even Gerty, the path they found themselves on now was a path Raynard knew well . . . .

They came, as it was, with a noise that could have been heard by few others. I have strong ears though, very strong ears, and a nose that can smell a child like no other. They say I'm a witch and perhaps, in their minds, they're right. But that's not the full truth of it. They fear me because I am fae. Well, that and my taste for human flesh—a fact I never told Raynard as he wormed his way into my loins and I wormed my way into his mind.

***

Once they were close enough, I cast a spell.

I know it's not a nice thing to do. It's trickery. It's devilish. But I don't think you fully understand how delicious that young boy looked and how hungry I was.

After creating an illusion that made my house look like candy, it was simple to hide the green tint to my skin, the yellow sheen to my eyes, the general . . . *earthy* look about me. I did that little trick every time Raynard had visited too. It was simple to magically alter my shabby dress and turn it into something struck somewhere between sweetheart and sexpot. It was, all in all, *easy* to get the siblings' attention. Not quite as easy as it had been to get Raynard's, but definitely the light side of difficult.

"I can smell something," Hansel said. It was the first real sentence he had said in some time. Mostly he'd been sniffling and whining about being lost.

"So do I." Gretel stopped. "Candy."

"In the woods?"

"Late at night?"

They were very intelligent children, you see. So what would bring any other two children tumbling my way in search of a new treat, regardless of the time, their mood, or the occasion, wouldn't quite do it for these two intrepid adventurers.

So they went back to back and circled each other, sniffing, their noses up in the air like two pointing buoys of life. Their eyes scanned the dark woods for me– I would be lying if I told you I wasn't a little worried. They looked so cautious, so unlike their parents, I thought they would outsmart me, or at least remain safely away from my stove until daylight.

It was at this time a stroke of luck struck and Gretel stumbled upon Hansel's breadcrumb trail. From my home, where I watched through a misty fae haze, I let out an audible gasp of joy the children didn't hear.

"What is this?" Gretel asked, picking up a piece.

Hansel didn't answer, but turned away, his cheeks flushing red.

"Answer me, Hansel," Gretel demanded.

Hansel whimpered.

It was better than any play I had seen in my many, many years.

"Hansel?"

Nothing but the slight jiggle of fat as he shook with nerves and fear.

“You’ve been creating a trail, haven’t you?” The way she asked that question made me suddenly long for her a different way. I wanted to eat him with every fiber of my being, to be sure. I wanted my mouth, jaw, throat, and stomach to grow, unhinge, unfold, and warp into something monstrous so I could eat all of him in one setting and not choke. I wanted to be like a snake devouring a mouse. He looked and smelled that good, you see. I also —to a certain degree anyway— had wanted to eat the girl. But the question had come out of her mouth like an accusation, like a threat, like everything a mortal woman had ever wanted to say to a mortal man ever . . . and everything changed. I sympathized with their plight—the ‘lesser sex.’ I couldn’t empathize. We have no set sexes where I’m from, though, based on my dalliances with Raynard, I suppose I was more akin to the female mortal than the male.

“N-n-no,” Hansel lied. Oh, but he was a horrible liar. Horrible. Then again, most mortal men are.

She reached out and grabbed his shoulder, squeezing hard. “You want them to find us and kill us?”

“No!” he jumped back, rubbing his plump shoulder. “I want to be able to get back if we get scared!”

“Are you scared?” She took a furtive step toward him.

“N-n-no.” Oh, what a horrible liar!

“It’s okay.” She reached out both hands now and placed them on his shoulders. The two children stood face-to-face, eyeing each other in the pale moonlight. “We can get through this. I understand. Why don’t we go see where that smell is coming from? Maybe it will help calm us both down.”

Hansel fell into his sister’s arms with a relief wrapped in tears and they hugged while he blubbered about his fear and his love for his parents and her and why would this happen and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Finally, Gretel stepped away, saying simply as she smoothed her ratty skirt, “I think it’s this way.” Anything to keep the boy calm.

They showed up and with only a little more prodding than I would have needed to give an average child, they came into my home, and before they knew what had hit them, I hit them, bound them in cages, dissolved the illusion, and went on my merry way making a marinade. Every good dish needs a marinade.

Oh to be sure Hansel shouted; Hansel screamed. Hansel even begged. Gretel didn’t though (which, at this point, was what I expected). As Hansel

settled comfortably into despair, Gretel went about the business of hating me the way she hated her parents. Her icy stare was the worst . . . or the best since it saved her life. I had decided, you see, after hearing her question Hansel, that she may have been unlike her mother and stepmother. She may have been worthy.

I had to know for sure.

"You don't cry," I said, poking my wooden spoon through her cage. "You, you're defiant. I noticed that when I first saw you."

She took a moment to digest those words, then spat at me.

I pulled back and laughed. Well, let's be honest, I cackled. That's probably why most mortals mistake me for a witch. Either way, this cackle surprised her. The look of loathing hid for a moment as her eyes grew wide with a mixture of curiosity and awe.

When I settled down, wiped the spittle from my chin, and saw this look on her cherub-like face, I took pause. "Why do you look so?" I asked. By this point her brother had been reduced to nothing more than a quietly sobbing hunk of meat.

"How do I look?" she asked. Her voice tried to be defiant but failed.

"You look . . . *shocked."*

She nodded.

"My reaction to your rude behavior?"

She nodded again.

"Would you rather I slapped you?"

"I'd rather you let me out of this cage."

"Would you now?" I raised an old eyebrow at her and stepped forward. Mortal children weren't normally like this, you know. This strong. They were normally like Hansel.

She nodded again.

I stepped closer still and reached out to touch the black metal bars that caged her.

"And my brother," she said, but her voice was a whisper.

I turned from her. "Your brother goes nowhere but my belly."

A louder whimper sounded from Hansel's cage.

I faced her again, my red eyes burning into Gretel's. "But you, my dear, *you* show potential."

"Potential?" she echoed my last word and I had her.

"Yes. Your brother is like the others."

“But he’s smart!” she shouted. “He’s like me!”

“Oh is he?” I asked, reaching between the bars and touching her innocent cheek with the pointed black nail of my index finger. I gently moved her face so she could see him clearly, huddled in his cage, making only the most animalistic of whimpers. “Look at him, dear.”

“I can’t—”

“I said *look*.” I wrapped my hand around her face and forced it to stay directed at the fat boy in the cage who had fallen into a pit of self-pity, just like all of my other meals. “Is he like you?”

Her silence was answer enough.

I continued about my work, knowing she would speak again. It didn’t take long.

“Wh-what will you do with me?”

“Teach you.”

“Teach me what?”

To answer her, I showed some of the might of my magic so the girl could take in the full magnificence that is me. My gown, morphed into a more elegant number, the kind I wore on evenings I dine. It shimmered in the light from an elegant chandelier appearing above us. My eyes sparkled with the glow of the fire, and my skin showed all of its green glory. I was the earth. I was nature. I was power. I was fae. I was beautiful.

“I will teach you to become me,” I said. Then I laughed, more for the effect it had on her than any serious mirth. This was all business now.

She cried. Naturally.

But her tears dried as I mixed and stirred and stirred and mixed. Her tears dried as the humidity rose from the boiling pot over the fire. Eventually, my home’s relative silence was broken once more by her young voice. “I’ll do it,” she said.

Simple as that.

I let her out of the cage and placed a blade in her hand. She knew what she had to do. She walked to her brother’s cage. His whimpers increased with each step she took. He was no longer human really, not in the sense that most mortals are anyway. He didn’t speak, didn’t beg for his life. He didn’t even tell her he loved her. He only whined; it was piggish, comical. She left her old self behind far quicker than I did.

Her mortal life must have been miserable.

“I want my parents too,” she said after the deed was done and my home was warmed by the smell of coppery blood.

I clapped my hands in joy.

Call me a witch if you will. Call Gretel a witch too. I know the truth of it. I’m fae. I always have been and I always will be. And Gretel?

Gretel is my greatest creation.

BURNING SNOW

Michael Porter

My name is Charming. I am Prince of The Enchanted Forest, and I have a tale to tell. I am old, and near death. So there is no more time for secrets. You have all heard the tale, at least the version told to peasant children. Everything in that story happened, but it is not the whole truth. It does not disclose the horrors that were to follow.

Over the years I have been a fair and just ruler. I was raised well. In the time when my father was King I learned every skill required for royal life. My every need was attended to at the castle. I received the best education, the best of everything. Although surrounded by servants and officials, busy with my duties, I often found myself lonely. I often found solitude hunting in the vast forests of my land.

One day, in the fall, I came across a young woman picking berries in the forest. She was of royal bearing, and truly beautiful. Her pale skin was contrasted by her ruby lips. She seemed terrified I had seen her, and in a flash she was gone.

In the days that followed, I found myself unable to stop thinking about the young woman. I didn't even know her name. I had mentioned the incident to my mother, who regaled me with quite the tale. In a neighboring kingdom, a young queen had gone mad. She had ordered the death of her step daughter, who had to flee the kingdom. She had never been seen again, and was rumored to haunt the woods. Her name was Snow White. My Mother warned me to avoid the woods for a time, as the Queen's followers would stop at nothing to find and kill the Princess.

Of course I didn't listen. If anything the story increased my determination to find the girl. I started spending more and more time in those woods, even defying the orders of my father. As the days grew shorter and colder I redoubled my efforts to find her, sometimes not emerging from the woods for days. Finally, one day, I found seven dwarves gathered around a golden coffin. Dwarves had not been seen in my lands for quite some time, so I decided to approach.

Much to my horror, it was Snow White in the coffin. Her Stepmother had cursed her with eternal slumber. Heartbroken, the Dwarves permitted me one last kiss to say good bye. Magically, she awoke. Within a month My

father's armies had overrun the mad queen's castle, and I had destroyed her once and for all. Her last words: "You think you've won..."

Snow White and I were married, and my father declared that I would now take over as king. Happily ever after. I wish the story was that simple, but it's not. For Snow White's sleep was plagued by horrific dreams. In the castle, surrounded by trusted servants and friends who had helped and comforted me my whole life, she could find no peace. She awoke each night screaming in terror, and soon refused to sleep at all. I summoned my finest doctors to attempt to find a cure for her malady. They either claimed ignorance or declared her mad.

One day after forcing herself to stay awake for several days, she fell into a deep slumber from which she would not awaken. My kiss would not awaken her this time. My efforts now turned to other methods. I summoned a powerful soothsayer to the castle. My servant Wendy was terrified. "Do not trust that man, my lord. He is in league with the ruinous powers!"

I was desperate, and enlisted his help anyway. He informed me that although my wife's body was here in the castle, her soul had departed elsewhere. I asked what could be done. He told me that he could send my soul to where she was, but that we might both be lost, and there would be a price. I agreed, seeing no other path.

That night in my slumber, I beheld a magnificent city. This was unlike any dream I had ever had, it was so real. Vast marble structures and gold soared skyward, of a style I had never seen. This seemed to be a place of Gods, with its many diamond fountains and vast gardens. If my wife had traveled here in her dreams, I could understand her fear of returning.

I wandered through those hidden, forgotten paths for quite some time. I marveled at the wonders of this lost city. Then I heard some kind of chanting. A could smell some kind of strange odor, like incense. Ahead of me at the giant, columned temple I could see a pillar of fire. Strangely clothed, bearded priests chanted in a language I could not understand or reproduce. They danced around the flames, in a macabre ritual worshiping death and chaos.

Near me, another observer in simple clothing seemed transfixed on the obscene display. I asked him, "What is happening?"

"It is the festival. The festival of snow. There is to be a sacrifice. It keeps the frozen desert at bay. Behold!"

To my horror, it was my beloved wife. She was strapped to a stone altar, then dumped into the roaring flames as she screamed and screamed. The priests rejoiced as their fevered occult dancing reached an insane frenzy of lust.

"NOOOOOO!!!"

I awoke, punching and kicking at thin air. The Soothsayer had watched over me through the night. My beloved wife remained trapped in her deep slumber. "Now do you understand? Every night she has relived what you have witnessed in that marvelous city of damned things."

"How can I free her from this torment?"

"You must dream again, and descend into the cavern of fire. Destroy the mad priests, and save your beloved wife. Then . . . then we will discuss payment."

Once again, I descended into the depths of the endless dream city. I approached the altar of fire, and found steps leading into the bowels of the temple. Strange writing decorated the walls as I descended the seventy steps toward the hellish abyss. The smell of sulfur and burning flesh assaulted my senses as I arrived in the main chamber.

"Why do you disturb the ceremony of snow? Who are you who enters the sacred chamber? It will be the death of your soul!"

I did not bother to answer. I imagined my sword in my hands, and it appeared. I cut the priest down, and moved on to the next. A few tried to fight, but these beasts of the pit were no warriors. Finally, I freed Snow from the altar. She was half mad with fear. "Are you real? ARE YOU REAL!?"

We both awoke in our Earthly castle. We were safe from that haunted city which lies in the dreams of the mad. The Soothsayer was pleased. I approached him with a large bag of gold.

"For your service to my family..."

He held up one hand. "It is not gold that I crave. I have a thousand times that bag. I seek something far more valuable."

I could not think of many things more valuable. "What is your wish then? Lands, title, gems? I can give you whatever you wish."

"I know you will. You belong to me. Not now, for you will live a long and glorious life. When you die, many years from now, we will return to the dream city. You will take her place on the burning altar."

"I will not. Be gone from this place."

Instantly my wife collapsed once again. "Then she will burn in the pits of tar and flame for a thousand years! GIVE ME MY PAYMENT!!!" He screamed in a vile, inhuman voice.

In the end, I signed his contract. He signed next to me. Initals LF. "It was a pleasure doing business with you my Prince. See you soon." His form exploded into green flame.

Now I am old, and ready to meet my dark fate. Soon I will descend into the burning halls of that forgotten dream temple, where old gods lick their rotted lips in the anticipation of my eternal suffering. It was a small price to pay. Small price to save the life of the one I love.

JUST A PEA

Ann K. Boyer

It was the kind of night where the wind blew sharp, slicing through cracks in the walls to nip at your toes. She snuggled deeper into the downy pillow-top, pulling the covers closer and bundling them around her still naked body. The heat that had once radiated off her lover had long faded, but the essence of his touched lingered.

Most honored guests, it is an honor and my privilege to present to you, my wife and the future Queen, she dreamed. Although he wasn't much to look at, tall and lanky, he did possess boyish charm, warm eyes, and a nice smile, and she could settle for those qualities. He was heir to the throne. That was all she really cared about.

Her lips twitched up into a mischievous grin at the unexpected touch of her Prince, sliding his cold fingers up her thigh, rounding her hip and then her navel, navigating the smooth landscape of her torso toward her breasts.

Ready to go again, she thought, moistening her lips in anticipation of where those playful fingers would settle upon.

Her body jerked with a giggle when he teased her foot, tickling its underside before wrapping around her petite ankle. When his icy fingertips feathered her nipple, she caught her breath but for a moment before releasing a soft moan.

His frigid touch excited her warm skin, triggering goose bumps to surface everywhere he touched: her ankles, her thighs, her heaving breasts, her…

Her eyes shot open. Panic gripped her by the throat as she realized, *The Prince doesn't have more than two hands*.

She opened her mouth to scream, but slimy objects invaded the space, and she choked on the bitter taste of rot and decay.

They were fast. And many.

Long, vine-like tentacles coiled around her neck, both of her wrists, and ankles, spreading her open against her will. Though she battled against their hold, she was defenseless to their strength and numbers. Her heart hammered against her chest, which quaked with every ragged breath she struggled to take. Intermittent whimpers escaped through the suffocating

gag, as she feared what would happen next. Her eyes shifted in all directions, searching for her savior, her prince to rescue her from this terrifying bondage.

Her soft cries turned to muffled screams once the ripping began.

Hook-like thorns grew out of the binding tendrils, tearing away flesh. The more she screeched through the squirming mass in her mouth and throat, the more vicious they rived, stripping away quivers of meat and splintered bone, coiling faster and squeezing harder.

Before long, all that remained of the young beauty with her heart set on the crown was a mess of bloody lumps and bits, with strands of her once golden hair strewn all over the pillow-top.

Once silence had returned to the room, the thorny vines retracted, slithering back from whence they came: hidden beneath the stack of down mattresses.

"Mother!"

The name could be heard echoing down every hall of the castle in the early morning hour.

"Mother!" he bellowed again a few heartbeats later, with a hint of panic about the edge.

She thought she heard her name being called over the rustling of her ladies' dresses and the patter of their soft-soled shoes, but she couldn't be sure. "Shh, shh," she commanded, with a wave of her hands as she tilted her head, aiming her ear toward the door of her chambers for better hearing.

"Mother! I need you!" she heard him cry.

Her heart jumped into her throat at the call of her name, "Oh! My dear boy! I'm coming!" she hollered back, gathering the layers of her gown into her arms to prevent tripping. "Mother's coming!"

The ladies rushed to add the finishing touches to her dressing, a comb for her hair and a dusting of rouge on her cheeks, before she beckoned them to go and took chase after her son's cries.

"Mother, please!" she heard him shout out again, passed the great room, from the end the guest hall.

She felt certain she knew the reason for his distress, as this was not the first time the silence of morning had been broken by his cries. Her sweet Prince needed her, and she would satisfy him as only she–a most doting mother–could.

“I’m here, my love,” she comforted, rushing to his aid.

When he saw her, he ran to meet her, folding himself into her outstretched arms and burying his face in her bosom.

“My precious boy, whatever has you so troubled?” she asked, stroking her fingers through his hair and pulling him in closer to her. His breath was hot and heavy, pushing through the ornate fabric of her corset and warming her skin.

“Oh Mother, it’s happened again,” he whimpered.

She looked to the pale face of the keeper, standing just outside the room. The green hue in her cheeks, the quiver of her bottom lip, and sheen over her forehead confirmed Queen Mother’s suspicion. It wasn’t necessary for her to venture to the room to know what horrors waited just beyond the door; her son’s sinful desires were, no doubt, painted all over. Again.

With a nod of her head and a glancing gesture to the other keepers standing at the end of the hall, they all went to work with sallow looks.

“Bleach the stench and change the sheets, and do make sure to scrub the floor and walls,” she commanded, shielding her son from the gore while she led him away. “Oh, and add another downy top.”

She loved having his face pressed against her chest, stroking his hair with her fingers, and his long lashes feathering the hairs along her neck. This is where he was meant to be: pressed against her. And only her.

“That makes twenty,” he whispered.

“Shh, don’t concern yourself with that. Mother’s taken care of it.”

He jerked away from her and peered into her eyes, “Don’t concern myself? Mother, please. I thought she would be the one.”

“The one?” she scoffed.

“Yes, the one,” he defended. “After probing kingdom after kingdom, I felt certain I had found The One, a *real* princess. The one worthy enough to wear the crown by my side.”

She found her son’s dramatics humorous. “Indeed, you’ve done plenty *probing*. Foolish boy, a real princess would never be your whore. She would not lie down with you just because you desired it.”

“And why not?” he questioned, taking offence to her mocking. “I am the son of the Queen, Prince to this land, and she is to do my bidding when I so desire, regardless of whether you approve of it.”

“You think yourself much too high. I am Queen, and as such, a real princess would never cross me in my own home, regardless of your probing desire. You should do well not to forget that.” Her words were stern, opening a wound in his pride and reminding him of her position—still above him.

“My apologies, Beloved Mother,” he relented with a shiver, as the memory of what became of the last man to cross the Queen. He would not make the same mistake his father made.

“My boy,” she said, reaching out to the Prince, “come to Mother.” Taking his face in her hands, she pressed her lips to his. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I shall make it all better.” She caressed his lips with hers, parting them with her tongue while her hands drifted downward.

Through her kiss, he asked, “And what of *it*?”

Her smile was devilish and calculating. “What? It’s just a pea.”

That night, a fearsome storm swept across the land. The Prince stood before the fireplace, sipping brandy and keeping warm. The Queen sat nearby, admiring her most precious love, while her fingers fondled and stitched yet another tapestry portrait of him. Thunder cracked as lightning flashed right outside the window, sending a shiver through the Queen, of which the Prince took notice.

“Here, let me comfort you,” the Prince offered, wrapping his firm arms around her.

She nuzzled into his neck, resting her ear on his chest, and listened to the steady thump of his heart. He was still warm.

“Mmm,” she moaned. “I see now why you love to curl against my body, resting your crown upon my breast.”

He smiled, stroking her cheek with his fingers, when the large brass knocker sounded through the manor.

The Queen sat up with a start and looked to the entrance. “Who the devil could that be at this hour?”

“Stay here,” the Prince instructed, before going to the foyer.

Three sequential knocks followed, each one landing harder than the last.

“Speak your name and your business here,” he commanded.

There was a beat of silence, and then another pattern of heavy bangs answered.

“I command you to speak your name and your business!”

There was another whipping crackle of thunder followed by several flashes of light, yanking a small yelp from the Queen. With wide, frightful eyes, she watched crooked shadows streak across the floor and walls, surrounding her.

The Prince stood ready, gripping his sword, and with a jerk of his chin, he ordered the butler to open the door. The solid mahogany structure swung open with an ear-piercing squeal, revealing a young maiden in tattered clothing, shivering against the wind. The Prince loosened his grasp on his sword at the sight of the pathetic girl.

“Your Royal Highness,” she said with a modest curtsy. “Please forgive my intrusion, but I’m afraid I am lost. Lightning spooked the horses drawing my coach and separated me from my convoy. They finally came to rest outside these gates where the guard escorted me to your door. Might I be so bold as to ask for shelter from this storm?”

When she raised her head, meeting her eyes with his, the Prince became entranced. He’d never seen eyes like hers before, the color of the deepest ocean waters during a raging tempest. Words had escaped him and he stood dumbfounded.

With a roll of her eyes, the Queen stood and approached, motioning to her son to put away his weapon and wipe the drool from his chin. “Heavens child, you must be freezing. Come in! Come in out of that rain!”

The girl entered with timid steps, never breaking sight with the Prince.

At a flick of the Queen’s wrist, several keepers dispersed to fetch towels and clothing for the young lady.

“I’m most grateful for your kindness, Your Majesty,” she said with another bob.

“Nonsense! We couldn’t very well leave you out in this storm,” the Queen said with a sly smile, taking in the whole sight of the frail girl. “Who did you say you were, again?”

The girl accepted a towel from one of the returning keepers and patted her face and neck dry. “My apologies, Your Majesty. I did not say. I am Princess Winifred,” she said with another bending of respect.

“Oh, child, stop that,” the Queen shooed. “There’s no need for such formalities. You are our guest for the night. And when the rains lift, I’m certain my son will probe the land to provide you safe passage home.”

“Thank you again, Madam,” she said with a nod.

The Queen continued her examination of this self-proclaimed “princess”, as the Prince showed the way to her room for the night. The girl’s dress looked too peasant-like for a princess, lacking all jewels and luster. Her nails were short, as though they were constantly chewed, and caked in dirt. Her hair was matted with clumps of dirt, in dire need of a proper washing. Worst of all was the stink of manure that wafted off the girl as she moved. In the Queen’s opinion, a true princess would never permit herself to look so plain and unkempt, regardless of the conditions outside. There was no doubt in the Queen’s mind that this was nothing more than a trollop from the streets, looking to steal her precious son away– just another whore that wouldn’t last through the night.

“I hope the room is to your liking,” the Prince said, opening the door to the guest room. “We’ve just had it cleaned.”

“Oh, it’s perfect. Thank you, My Lord.”

“There are twenty pillow-top mattresses made from the best down for you to sleep upon. Simply heavenly for anyone of true royalty,” the Queen offered, pressing her hand into the mattresses to demonstrate their softness to the Princess.

“It’s more than I could have hoped for. I am most grateful again for your kindness.”

“It’s the least we could do for you. Should you desire washing, there’s a bath just through that door there,” she motioned. “Otherwise, we will leave you to rest. Won’t we, son?”

The Prince failed to acknowledge her, still enchanted by the Princess. The heat of jealousy embraced the Queen and after a swift kick to his shin, she regained the Prince’s attention. He nodded in agreement and backed out of the room.

His trembling hands grappled the wall, while he peered through the inconspicuous hole in the wall that led to the guest bathroom. With bated breath, he watched the Princess leave her rain-filled clothes in a heap on the floor at her feet. Her naked form pleased him, even if it were covered in filth.

“Mmm, such a dirty girl,” he whispered.

She paused before stepping into the steaming water and looked toward the wall, as though she’d heard his soft words. She turned toward

the Prince. With a smirk, she ran her hands over her body, massaging her breasts and licking her lips.

The Prince's body quivered at her tease.

After a playful wink, she sank into the vessel and covered herself with bubbles. She hummed a sweet melody as she washed her skin and hair of the dirt and rain.

He would have her.

The Prince waited for the Princess outside the closed door, startling her when she opened it.

"My Lord, you gave me fright."

"My apologies, My Lady," he said with a bowing head. "I didn't mean to scare you." He took a step closer to her and ran his fingers along her naked shoulder. "I thought you might desire my company."

She took notice of his roaming hand before looking at him through her lashes.

"No." The word was sharp and stabbed his pride.

He couldn't believe it. No maiden had ever refused him. And so firmly, too. His brow furrowed with disbelief. "What?"

Without another word, she removed his hand from her arm, throwing it down.

He retreated to the door bewildered and speechless, pausing to look over his shoulder at her climbing the stepladder to the bed. His eyes glanced to the bottom mattress. "May you rest in peace, Princess," he said through a clinched jaw, before slamming the door behind him.

The Princess dismissed the wounded Prince without another thought.

After a few brushes of her long auburn hair, the Princess nestled into the covers, pulling them tight around her and drifting fast asleep.

She tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable.

Her eyes shot open to movement under the covers.

The next morning, a breakfast spread of platters of eggs and sausages, pancakes and syrups, and toast with jams filled the great hall with a delightful aroma. The Prince burst into the room, dispatching keepers to once again clean the guest room.

"Mother! You won't believe what that little harlot did to me last night," he sneered, reaching for a piece of fruit from the centerpiece.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but your mother won’t be joining us this morning.”

The fruit fell from the Prince’s hand, landing with a smack on the floor. He was stunned.

“How di-di-did you–” he stuttered.

“Sleep?” the Princess finished. “Most dreadful, I’m afraid. That was, of course, until I found the most curious thing under all those mattresses.” She held out her hand and cradled in her palm was the pea, shriveled and sucked of life. “Her Majesty the Queen proved very useful to me, though.”

The Prince continued to stammer incoherent half words.

With a devilish and calculating smile, the Princess said, “What? It’s just a pea.”

ZOMAID: TOUCHED BY DEATH

A "The Little Mermaid" Redux

Rita Dinis

"Once upon a time, in a splendid palace on the bed of the bluest ocean, lived the Sea King, a wise old triton with a long, flowing, white beard. He lived in a magnificent palace, built of gaily colored coral and seashells, together with his five daughters, very beautiful mermaids.

Sirenetta, the youngest and loveliest of them all, also had a beautiful voice, and when she sang, the fishes flocked from all over the sea to listen to her. The shells gaped wide, showing their pearls and even the jellyfish stopped to listen. The young mermaid often sang, and each time, she would gaze upwards, seeking the faint sunlight that scarcely managed to filter down into the depths."

Until one day the surface answered her, in a rather wicked way.

The bluish, lovely sea became tainted. As days and nights went by, the sea water around them cried, screamed, bloody tears the size of whales dissolving, mangling and staining the purity of their kingdom in the deep ocean. Putrid remains and dismantled bodies of men –the species inhabiting that airy ecosystem above them– now met the abyss floor without mercy, polluting and hurting the view of the sea inhabitants.

All of it held the inevitable stench of *death*.

It didn't take much for the wise triton king to realize something very serious was happening on solid land. Several marine creatures, whose lifespan included sharing of both earthly and marine worlds, brought the king terrible news. As the king's faithful subjects, there was no reason to doubt their reports of horror, violence and gory wars fought without weapons. The calm and friendly side of humans apparently had changed. And not against anything or anyone in particular. The humans, it seemed, had become a threat to themselves: behaving in a rather self-destructive way, biting, murdering… transforming each other into irrational eating machines, surviving and massacring those who still bore sanity with a sadistic purpose unknown to the creatures of the sea.

It was disturbing.

In fact, the king believed the humans had become ill– most likely, a disease had invaded them, converting that kind into soulless, hunting

creatures with nothing but a vile desire to destroy.

After some days of considerate thinking, locked in his royal chambers, the king finally decided to make an appearance. The Palace staff was expectant– his family gathered in the main *salon* surrounded by gracious creatures as if nothing was happening above. The pathetic scenario of unawareness in front of him made him sigh with annoyance. Content bivalves, dancing dolphins. Only that stoic, petulant starfish seemed to be in consonance with his mood. Well, maybe the starfish knew more of the real world than everyone in the Palace.

Before he allowed himself to speak, he caught ear of the conversation engaged by his wife and his younger daughter, who was saying the most troubling words he could have heard that day:

"Oh, how I'd love to go up there and at last see the sky, which everyone says is so pretty, and hear the voices of humans and smell the scent of the flowers!"

"You're still too young!" said her mother. "Only when you're fifteen will the King let you go up there, like your sisters!"

Oh, right, her sisters. His four daughters that had been allowed to go up there several times, even days after the dark red tainted the water and that sticky plankton started to invade the gardens like a plague. Excess of organic matter did that to a marine ecosystem. There was actually no way around it.

Damn eutrofization, the king mentally cursed. How long until algae-like protozoans would consume all their oxygen and kill their food, would remain a mystery– for now. But the king knew better. They, sea creatures, wouldn't have much time. Not forever, for sure.

"*Up-there* travels are suspended indefinitely," the king affirmed, earning a hard stare from his progeny– especially from his younger one. The king didn't particularly enjoy such a harsh stare.

"No, young one, you cannot go to the surface. You won't breathe that air and won't see the sky."

After a long second, Sirenetta unlocked her gaze from her father's and darted as smoothly as her flaring temper allowed, towards her chamber. She swam so fast that her tail flicked the acrobatic gathering mass of lobsters watching, hearing her father's speech, all scattering randomly with the sudden movement.

Ignoring his young daughter’s flare, the king continued with his speech.

“It's not our world! We cannot watch it peacefully and admire it like we used to! And for those who have to go up there… be careful and keep away from humans; they can only bring bad luck!"

Bad luck. Right.

That sure was an understatement.

As a young mermaid, she knew that most things weren’t allowed to her– yet, but she spent most of her time wishing for the world of humans, listening to her sisters' stories every time they returned from the surface. All those times, she asked them questions.

Her curiosity was far from being sated. And now it seemed that it would never be.

Her father’s words had been tough. She couldn’t go up and see the land, the place of Man, the species living above. Oh, and how amazing the tales from her sisters were, having her dreaming awake and making her heart beat faster. It was a fishy heart, only with two chambers, but it worked just fine, startled with anticipation like any four-chambered heart.

Her temper flared as she recalled, with sadness, the orders upon her. Why, why had her father prohibited her with such determination?

Was there a reason? A strong one? A serious one? Any reason at all?

As she narrowed her eyes in deep thinking, a soft knock on her chamber’s door sounded.

The door opened slowly, revealing her older sister and her aquamarine tail. A frown decorated her fair face, and the young mermaid realized at once that her sister wouldn’t bring her good news.

On the contrary.

“Sirenetta,” the older sister said, swimming towards her sister. “The world above is unwell. This is enough reason for you not to go there.”

“Says who?”

Sirenetta’s words were harsh for a princess, but she cared not.

“Father says,” her sister insisted. “The King.”

The bond with her sisters was strong, but Sirenetta couldn’t stop thinking about how deprived she would become if such an experience was to be denied from her life.

“It’s unfair. I’m turning 15 in days, I must not be denied that honor!”

With eyes burning, threatening to boil the water around them, her sister answered her, measuring no words, sparing no tenderness towards her young sister.

"What awaits you above is no honor! You don't even imagine the horror spread on men's land."

"So you saw it. You saw that horror."

"Yes. And I wish I hadn't. Those images will plague my mind forever."

Sirenetta couldn't help herself. Her curiosity was immense and not even the terrified look on her sister's complexion appeased her intentions.

"Describe it."

"What?"

"The horror you affirm to have seen. Describe it to me."

"You cannot be serious."

"Then you are lying."

"How dare you!" Sirenetta's sister couldn't believe her young sister's words. "We are trying to protect you, Sirenetta, and yet you throw at me– at us, your sisters that care for you, that childish unfairness of not having your way."

"I want what I have the right to, by birth. As you all had."

"The circumstances are different now."

"I don't see it that way."

"Your stubbornness will lead you nowhere. You will stay in the Palace, and that is all."

Sirenetta's sister swam out of the bedroom while the younger mermaid watched her leave, crossing her arms against her chest.

We'll see about that, Sirenetta thought, deviously narrowing her eyes.

After thorough consideration, Sirenetta started to prepare for her secret travel, and as she waited for the day when –supposedly– she too would be allowed to reach the surface of the sea and meet the unknown world, Sirenetta spent her time in the Palace. Discreetly scanning the surroundings, gateways, passages and the guard schedules, the young mermaid played the part of the obedient child. Sometimes she lingered at the sea garden, where the seahorses kept her company, and sometimes a dolphin would come and play. Only the unfriendly starfish never replied when she called. As usual,

the neutral starfish seemed more aware of her intentions than she would like it to be.

Finally, her long-desired birthday came. The night before, Sirenetta could not sleep a wink. At the Palace, everyone was busy with the preparation for her birthday party. Her Mother and sisters prepared her birthday gift, hoping Sirenetta would feel happy with it. Little did they know what the little mermaid had in mind for that day. She knew the details of the ceremony– and the thought made her sick to the point of wanting to slap her father's hand from her scaly skin. The king would do as he always did with her sisters: he would stroke her long golden hair, slip a lovely carved flower into her locks and… would not allow her what she wanted the most: the surface.

And that could not do.

She was no more, no less than her sisters, and she was going to have what she wanted. Certainty filled her loins with powerful adrenaline.

When her 15th birthday finally came, celebrations started early. All the Palace dived into a faux sense of joy and animation, secretly trying to avert Sirenetta of the gift she would not receive. The young mermaid, clever but determined, played along, not revealing once her distaste and sadness. Little did they all know that Sirenetta had long prepared her own birthday present.

Later that night, with the Palace silent and asleep, Sirenetta remained wide awake.

She was prepared, she felt unstoppable.

And greasy as a sea snake, she escaped the meticulous vision of the Palace Guards and made her way towards the dangerous place all the sea creatures seemed to avoid: the surface.

With a silent plop, the young mermaid surfaced. The travel had been long, fast and filled with adrenaline. It was a prohibited journey for such fine royalty as herself and Sirenetta soon realized her sister had been right after all. The sea column consistency had changed some kilometers beneath surface, which made it all more difficult to breathe. Contaminated and blurry, the water changed as the fair mermaid reached the top.

Sirenetta remained with her nose at water-level, her eyes scanning the surroundings. Close enough to a rock-bank, the young mermaid allowed herself a moment to resurface completely, the rocks allowing her to hide

partially. Everything was so calm, so… strangely silent. The shore was painted red and brown, decaying corpses and several body parts decorated the landscape. The moonlight hit the dirty waves that caressed the sand.

This world smells of death, she thought, even if she had never smelled death before. It was something that once smelled, one knew at that very moment what it was.

"What a disappointment…" she whispered to herself.

However, something huge and bulky caught her attention: a ship was slowly anchoring close to the rock-bank on which Sirenetta was hiding. Her eyes scanned that woody giant as she suddenly spotted movement aboard. As the ship swayed gently in the calm sea, the young mermaid watched four men lighting a lantern for the night, preparing a smaller boat and talking amongst themselves as they now sailed towards land.

“Shore is clear,” one of them said, with a low tone. “No flesh-eaters in sight.”

“Let us be quick. Gather supplies and be off the shore as fast as possible. We cannot afford to bring someone bitten aboard.”

“Keep it down. And no talking while we’re there. We have thirty minutes.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Sirenetta listened to those men talking with a sharp ear. With her acute vision she could see them perfectly, as if night was day, and one of those men caught her attention. His fair complexion, his disheveled dark hair, his tired eyes and his body conquered her innocence far too quickly. The others called him “Captain”, albeit he was young and determined.

She dived silently, hoping to find and hear more as she got close to that little boat. The four of them had now gone onto the land, disappearing beyond her sight, in search of what they mentioned to be supplies.

Would that be food? she concocted, remaining underwater and occasionally peeping through the waves.

Minutes passed and she caught sight of movement, a lazy and uncoordinated movement by the beach. One man came, walking like a handicapped crab, grunting and rotting, with torn clothing and an ill stench. And not a minute later, more came, walking randomly, chaotically on that shore.

It didn’t take much for Sirenetta to realize those must be the “flesh-eaters” the men of the ship had talked about. And it didn’t take an instant

for those four men, Captain included, to be surprised with a walking mass of rotting creatures as they made their way back to shore, arms filled with supplies.

As Sirenetta took in the seriousness of the situation, her heart flared. Her handsome, tall Captain was trapped. There was no possible way to reach shore, to break through that wall of stinky creatures that now walked towards them, eager to eat them. Panic invaded them as they tried to out run and escape the creatures. All she could see was her Captain being followed by a horde of walking, filthy meat.

Without thinking, Sirenetta surfaced and started to… *sing.* It was all she could do to avert the attention and give a chance to those men to escape, to find a way to reach their little boat. Her half-body appeared and she sang, hoping to seduce the ears of those creatures who didn't know how to cope with the sounds her throat provided. Surprise invaded the faces of those men who –thankfully– didn't let the opportunity escape. As the acute marine notes filled the night, confounding for a moment those horrible creatures, she observed how brave her Captain was, caring for the safety of his men and letting himself stay behind, at the tail of a running rush. Seeing his qualities gave her strength to keep on singing, but those flesh-eaters were fast learners.

As the men reached the boat, rushing to get away from the shore, the unexpected happened. One of the filthy walkers grabbed her Captain by his arm and both fell in shallow water. With a painful groan of anger and despair, Sirenetta's song ended – not as a fine melody, but as a horrific score.

As her Captain fought against that creature's hold, she found strength to dive and, not minding the shallow water that would give her existence away, she swam towards him and pushed the walker away. The creature was smart and insisting, making its way towards the water to get its prize, but Sirenetta knew better.

As a mermaid, she had her natural defenses. Her arm's scales were a deadly weapon against predators. So, with a decisive strike, she drew her pointy, sharp scales against that creature, severing its legs like butter. As the upper body of that grunting creature met the water, red tainted the shore and Sirenetta felt lost for a moment. She swam backwards, but felt the creature's hands and filthy nails rasp her tail while she moved like a dolphin, meeting her Captain, who remained floating not far from her.

When she reached his form, he was unconscious, but breathing. She didn't see any injuries as far as she could assess, and she tried to transport him towards the boat which had reached the ship already. Guiding his body while she swam underwater, she reached the ship, making noises like a dolphin so that the sailors could hear something and help to retrieve her Captain.

"It's him! The Captain is there!"

She smiled as she slowly let go of his body, automatically missing the sensation of having him near her, but she understood that it was time to let her Captain go to his world and lead his men.

She had saved him. He was fine now. And even through the column of dirty water she could see those men aboard retrieving their Captain back to the ship, a mix of voices wondering about what had just happened.

"You will not believe it."

"There was a creature, in the water, singing."

"Is the Captain injured?"

No, thanks to me, Sirenetta thought as she smiled underwater, moving her tail with happiness– a small indiscretion that had her overexposed.

"Look, there's something under water, moving."

"It's the creature!"

"It saved him. The Captain."

And without further thinking, she dived, not to resurface again. It was time to go home, knowing her Captain was now in good hands.

The first thing the young Captain saw when he opened his eyes again was the beautiful face of his soon-to-be wife among his men on that ship.

Sirenetta rushed to the Palace in haste, hoping not to get caught. She swam automatically, her head in the last events she had witnessed and participated in.

Her Captain, that fair, lovely man was all she could think about. How close he had been from death, how brave she had been, raising her scales towards that rotting piece of walking meat, all *for* him. To save him.

Unable to deal with such strong emotions, the young mermaid decided to think about all that had happened, knowing that she would have to keep this secret to herself and to herself alone, because no one could know the lines she had crossed.

As days and nights went by, Sirenetta remained silent. Silent with questions, with fear, with longing. The image of that human plagued her mind and she didn't know how she could deal with it – feelings were difficult to manage.

But, since she wasn't dumb, Sirenetta knew all along her love for the young Captain could not be possible to fulfill. There was the unmistakable barrier of species between them. She was a mermaid, and he was a human. Not to mention he didn't know of her existence. Her love for him was clearly one-sided.

And the prospects of changing that reality weren't in her favor.

"What is it, my daughter? What seems to consume your thoughts so deeply?"

Her mother's voice sounded, as Sirenetta remained sitting at the Palace Garden. She looked at her mother, knowing she could not tell her the truth, ever. But her inquisitiveness and doubts prevailed once more.

"I am curious about humans."

"I am sure you are," her mother replied. "But that is only because you haven't seen them as we all have."

How guilty she felt for not telling her mother about what happened.

"Do they know we exist?"

"No, of course not!" Her Mother's stare turned serious. "They must not know of us, ever. We are protected here. If humans find us, we will never have peace."

"Why?"

"They will hunt us, like they do with other sea creatures."

Sirenetta nodded, concluding that her Mother's intervention added more problems instead of solving them.

How could she ever find and –who knows– meet her Captain properly, if he wasn't supposed to know about her existence?

In the back of Sirenetta's mind, all she could do was wonder if the Captain would be as good as her keeping secrets.

It didn't take much for Sirenetta to try her luck once again.

She missed her Captain immensely and she knew they remained exactly where they had docked because she had overheard a sea lion commenting about it with her father, the wise triton king.

Knowing she would have to be extra cautious this time, she prepared another secretive rise to the surface, decided to make an appearance to her

Captain. She had to tell him she had been the one saving him the other night and of course, she would have to try and disclose her feelings to him.

"Please, let him believe in me," she prayed, although she knew she was only trying to reassure herself.

She knew the risks were increasing. Each time she dared to slip from the Palace and go up there, she risked everything: her life, her safety, the wrath of her father.

Once again the young mermaid waited for the right time to escape. The Palace was silent and everybody had been asleep for hours now. It was late night already.

Like before, she traveled fast and hasty towards the surface. Anxiety invaded her, because she knew she was going to see her Captain again. His image, his face, his body called her, gave her strength to continue and go, swim until the sea's end.

Thankfully, her journey didn't last long and sooner than expected, she reached the surface, where the night bathed the shore with a moonless sky.

The ship was not illuminated –for not to draw the flesh-eater's attention- she assumed, but there was movement aboard.

With an apprehension difficult to disguise, she sharpened her ear, hoping to hear the voice that would give peace to her young heart.

But all she could hear were other voices. The sailors talked about the Captain's injuries, and Sirenetta shivered at the thought of her Captain– injured and ill.

Focusing harder, she realized where the Captain laid, in a sheltered area of the ship. She heard him breathe, asleep, as someone sat close to him, whispering words of comfort.

It was a female's voice.

"Get better, my love," she heard the woman say, crying. "Do not abandon me…"

With hurt stabbing her heart, Sirenetta closed her eyes, wishing she was the one comforting him, and not… whoever that woman was.

Resting against the ship, Sirenetta remained, waiting for the crew to retreat and go to sleep, so that she could, at least, try and see her Captain.

Her feelings blinded her. Deep down inside she knew she shouldn't risk this much, but her heart screamed to her, compressed with the proximity and the prospect of seeing *him*.

So, when finally a thick silence fell upon the ship, Sirenetta took her chance.

The air was cruel to her, to her fishy limbs and all those fins in her lower body. How graceful the water made her. But in here, in this heavy, strange surrounding, she could only pray not to make noise and be capable of entering the Captain's premises in silence.

With difficulty, she made it to the Captain's chambers. The fin by the end of her tail allowed her to walk, but all her elegance had disappeared. She recalled that maybe she would look as ridiculous on Earth as humans on water, when they tried to fight against the sea.

The sight of her Captain asleep, with a cloth covering his forehead, won her. How handsome he was, even in agony, with *sudden illness*, as those sailors had mentioned.

She scanned his form, not minding the extra sleepy presence in the room. Her hand touched his cheek, and she marveled at the contact.

However, in the middle of all the adoration she felt towards the man she knew she could never have, the smell by the wound of his forearm alerted her. It was familiar, something she had smelled before.

But from where?

She brought her face close to the cloth enclosing the wound, closing her eyes and trying to focus.

"Are you real?"

She opened her eyes immediately, meeting her Captain's stare. His velvet voice, so masculine and wrapping, encased secret promises she longed to have, to feel, to share.

"I am, my Captain," she answered with a smile. Her wavy hair fell along her sides, reaching the sheets, soaking them with salty water.

"Am I going to die?" The Captain asked, a tear falling as he spoke.

How fragile her Captain seemed, now that illness had grasped him.

"Not if I can help it," Sirenetta said, her hand touching his, her heart looping inside her chest. "I will heal you."

"Please," the man said, grasping her hand and touching the delicate, small scales next to her forearm.

"But you must promise me something," Sirenetta alerted, eyeing the ill and fragile man in front of her and caressing his jaw with one of her wet fingers. "Choose me."

The young Captain eyed the mermaid that held him, not knowing what to say.

"Choose me over her," Sirenetta clarified, eyeing the sleeping woman, completely unaware of her surroundings. "Promise me."

"I-I promise…" The young Captain declared, eyeing the mermaid with a hallucinating stare. The man could not believe what he was seeing, what he was dreaming.

The young Captain could not conceive of such beauty, such power.

"Await my come-back, Captain." Sirenetta smiled, eyeing him with adoration. "Soon, I shall return to your side."

And with this, the mermaid kissed the man's forehead, the cold and wet of her lips providing him with comfortable relief. He closed his eyes as her face and hair dangled close to him.

"What is your name?" He whispered against her hair.

And as he saw her strangely crawl towards the door of his chambers, the mermaid turned and took some time thinking, until finally she said:

"You may call me Siren."

The door closed with a click and the mermaid dived directly from the ship, not bothering with the splashing noise.

With haste and happiness as her guide, all she could think about was how she could find a way to cure her Captain. She would have to ask her sisters, her Mother. Surely, they would know a way. And, once that surpassed, she would finally own him.

He promised, she thought. *He promised to choose me*!

Her cheerfulness would have lasted forever, if she hadn't had someone waiting for her right there next to the ship.

Her father, the triton king, was there.

And he was not content.

Busted, the young mermaid thought as daughter and father swam in silence back to the palace.

For what it seemed, everyone knew of Sirenetta's little escapade. Her Mother eyed her sadly and her sisters shook their heads, those beautiful hairs flowing in the water.

The whole family was now gathered at Sirenetta's chambers.

For a while, no one spoke. Then her Father broke the silence.

"Will you say nothing?"

“I have nothing to say.” Sirenetta’s tone was defiant. “I do not regret my actions.”

“Sirenetta!” Her mother whispered, crying.

But the young mermaid’s goal was far different from apologizing.

“The human Captain is ill, mother. He needs our healing. Please, he–”

“He promised he would choose you, is that right?”

The triton king had interrupted his daughter with a fierce look in his aged eyes.

“Yes, he did.”

“And you believe he would choose a little mermaid to be his wife, a creature of a different kind who knows nothing of life and death? You are naïve, daughter, to think that a human would choose you over a human woman.”

Those words hit the young mermaid’s heart like a heavy hit. She believed his human, she believed his word, but her father and king had a different opinion.

“I believe him.”

“You are a fool, and that is why, if you choose to heal that human, you will be on your own. Permanently.”

Sirenetta’s sisters were surprised with the king’s decision.

“Father!”

“It’s decided! Choose the human, or us.”

“She is only a child!”

Her mother cried, and Sirenetta didn’t know what to think, what to say. Even if her heart had made the choice for her.

“Cry no more, mother. I will bear the consequences of my decision.”

Sirenetta’s words echoed and the wise king left her daughter’s premises without a word.

In the end, silence had answered for her.

Given the lack of options, the young mermaid could only count on one creature to help her to conquer her beloved Captain: The Witch of the Deeps.

Sirenetta didn’t have much choice but to find the only one with power enough to cure a human from such a dreadful illness.

The voyage towards the Witch’s cave was long but Sirenetta was decided to do everything she could to have the human with her, healed. He

had promised he would choose her, and she believed him, even considering the circumstances, the harsh world up there, with all the flesh-eaters on the human's tail.

"Hello?" Sirenetta said, hoping someone would come to greet her. This area of the deep sea was scary enough without the perspective of visiting a witch.

A humongous squid appeared out of nowhere, one of its tentacles grasping the mermaid's fine throat.

"What brings you here?"

"I would like to speak with the Witch."

"And who are you?"

"Sirenetta."

"Well, well, if it isn't the king's youngest," sounded a scornful, female voice from inside the cave. Slowly, the tentacles freed Sirenetta and the young mermaid was allowed to enter the dark, scary cave. How different this place was from the luminous and colorful gardens of the palace.

"Do you seek advice from me?"

The witch stared intently at the young mermaid, capturing her with her eyes. Sirenetta tried to explain to the witch the dilemma she was in.

"I need to heal a human."

"Oh. Would that human be the Captain of *Concordia*?"

"Yes."

"The human is not ill, little mermaid. The human is merely transforming."

Panic grew inside Sirenetta's heart, and she placed her tiny hands on her chest, horrified with the witch's words.

"Into what?"

"A flesh-eater."

"No! No, it-it can't be! I saved him! I-"

"He was exposed and he will transform, little mermaid."

Tears welled in Sirenetta's eyes, and she felt like she must do all she could to prevent her Captain from transforming. After all, he was her reason to live, her reason to resurface, to meet him and feel his human hands touch her desperately, like he had done the night he had promised he would choose her if she healed him.

And as Sirenetta remembered the Captain's words, her heart leaped at the idea of having him all for herself. So she thought she could ask the witch, knowing that, most likely, the price to pay would be high. But, in turn, she would have her love. Her most wanted human love.

"Can you heal him? Please! I'd do anything!"

"Anything?"

Sirenetta nodded, expecting anything from that evil witch.

"I will heal him… at the cost of your health."

Her health for his, Sirenetta thought. It seemed a fair price, considering her innate capacities of healing.

"He promised to choose me if he heals."

The witch narrowed her eyes at the young mermaid, trying to think of a much better deal, considering the despair Sirenetta felt. Her obsession with that human could still be of profit, concocted the witch.

"If that is the case, you must get rid of that tail and have some human legs and feet. For that purpose, I will give you this potion for you to drink."

Words were said and a bottle with a dark liquid inside rested upon Sirenetta's hands.

"You will wake up with legs, but there will be a price to pay, little one."

The young mermaid stared at the witch, knowing she wouldn't have much chance but to acquiesce to the witch's demanding. Sirenetta couldn't rely on anyone from her family to help her.

"Your voice."

Sirenetta gulped with hurt pride, closing her eyes and abandoning herself to inescapability. What she was about to concede to the witch– her lovely, crystal voice, was a part of her she would never thought she would lose.

"So be it."

"But be warned!" The witch went on. "You will suffer horribly, as though a sword were cutting you apart. And every time you place your feet on the earth, you will feel dreadful pain."

"It doesn't matter," the mermaid whispered, her eyes on the little bottle on her hands.

"Good luck, young mermaid." The witch said, dismissing the young mermaid from her dirty den. "May the captain be wise enough to keep his promise…"

As Sirenetta swam, with tears on her eyes, away from the witch's cave, she heard her ironic laugh and cruel words, false and mean wishes for that young mermaid's future.

Holding on to that small, little jar in her feeble hands, all Sirenetta could wish was for everything to be all right.

Once resurfaced, Sirenetta approached the ship once again.

It was right into the night, late hours immersed in a dead silence, only the calming sound of waves reaching the shore, brushed with renewed tones of red and black.

The flesh-eaters must have stricken again, the little mermaid thought, hoping her Captain could be safe from what had happened during her long absence.

In the calm of the night, as Sirenetta tried to reach the Captain's premises, she heard something that made her elegant scales crawl.

"It must be done. The Captain's life is doomed."

It was a female voice– the voice of her human rival, the one that also wanted her Captain. Sirenetta felt despair, panic and… rage. The deadly pointy scales on her arms rose immediately, as if in need of defending her beloved human.

I must hurry, she thought, *or they will have him killed before the healing.*

Silently the mermaid reached the Captain's premises and, once inside, drank the magic potion, not caring of what would happen to her from that moment on.

Sirenetta didn't recall when she lost consciousness.

However, there hadn't been pain, just like the witch had warned her. The young mermaid awoke at dawn, the crew outside noisy, making her wonder what could possibly be happening aboard.

But then, when she looked at herself, she didn't know if she should feel shocked or relieved.

The potion had worked – partially. Her tail had been split in two. She had now two new appendages, somehow similar to what the humans called legs… and feet. But she still had scales, she still had fins between her foot toes… and if she joined her legs, she could easily perform movements just like if she had her tail. To her astonishment, her newly-formed feet had rasp

marks… of fingernails. The image of that flesh-eater grasping her tail as she tried to escape the night she saved her Captain came to her mind.

And then, she looked at the Captain, laid down on that bed, quiet and silent as if profoundly asleep.

He smelled of rotten meat.

Rage, fury and anger grew inside her and tears fell from her eyes, landing on her new-born legs.

The witch had tricked her.

Seducing her with false promises, the witch had managed to weaken her, taking away her longevity as a marine creature and… her voice. For nothing at all, the mermaid had transformed into something that wasn't a human woman… or a mermaid. She now was something in between, an aberration, an incomplete endeavor of a sick creature whose greediness knew no limits.

A strangled cry came out of Sirenetta's throat, and the sound surprised her.

My voice…, she thought, not understanding what was happening, what in fact had happened with her body and the *real* effect of that potion on her anatomy.

She tried to vocalize some words, realizing that she actually had a voice… but it was very different from her previous one. Her voice had been clear, feminine, soprano-like. Now, it was rough, aggressive and raspy, with little femininity.

"You malicious witch, what have you done?" the mermaid whispered, barely recognizing her own voice as she tried to get on her feet, an action that pained her new anatomy immensely.

And before she could think, do or say anything, the door of the Captain's premises opened and Sirenetta was exposed to the scrutiny of several humans– men, and one woman.

They all locked stares with the recent-transformed mermaid, a moment of tension following as she quickly realized they had come to execute the love of her life, who still remained unhealed and barely alive.

"You!" The woman said, her voice barely audible. "It is you he has been talking about, day and night."

Sirenetta narrowed her eyes, a grin of satisfaction invading her as she processed the woman's words. She had made an impression, after all.

“It is me,” she said, walking painfully to block their view from the captain’s bed. “*Siren*.”

The little mermaid’s voice came out like a predator’s would, threatening and territorial, her stance defensive. They would not hurt her Captain. She would not let them.

“Die, creature.” The woman said, grabbing a small sword and advancing towards the legged mermaid.

Sirenetta’s senses grew focused all of the sudden, her arms and hands with purpose of her own. Seeing how the woman prepared to strike a deadly blow on her, reacting with a defensive move, the sword stopped on the mermaid’s scale arms, not going through, not severing the limb as the woman would have wanted to.

The stares of both women –a human and a former mermaid– burned, a speechless fight of forces that could not match, for the human held fire inside herself and the mermaid spilled watery dedication, enchanted devotion from her pores, both strengths colliding mercilessly.

Until one of the elements spoke higher.

With a swift move, the mermaid disarmed the woman, eyeing suddenly the men that still remained by the door, watching both women fight. Indecision bathed their faces.

“Were you to kill the Captain?” Sirenetta asked the woman, who remained still, obviously lost in thought, not knowing what to do next.

“He is very ill, and-”

“Answer me. Were you to kill him or not?”

The former mermaid demanded to know what the woman’s intentions were, for she wouldn’t allow her Captain to be apart from her again. Ill or not, no human would take him away from her. It had been enough the days she had been away, trapped inside her father’s palace, awful days in which she couldn’t afford to resurface to catch a glimpse of her Captain’s face.

“He no longer lives.” The woman suddenly answered, and Sirenetta didn’t need any further confirmation. A new sensation flowed all over her, and she took her time recognizing it.

It was *disgust*.

“Wrong answer.” The former mermaid said, with a low, menacing tone and, letting herself be guided by her instincts, she raised her scaly arm and with a sudden movement, the pointy, sharp scales on her forearms

rising with purpose, innocent fury blinding the former mermaid's senses. In less than a second, everything had ended.

The limp body of the woman in front of her fell in one direction, while the severed head rested sideways. Fresh red bathed the woody floor, and the only sound heard were the gasps of the sailors that remained at the door, their eyes on the detached head and the calm of the executioner– a creature, half-woman, half-mermaid, with discreet resemblances to the creatures that plagued the shore intermittently, tainting mercilessly both worlds, earth and sea.

Never had they seen such thing, such transformation… such power.

Meanwhile, Sirenetta blinked, both surprised and relieved with her actions. She didn't know exactly what she had done, as she breathed heavily, her hair now flowing next to her differently, for she wasn't only a marine creature. Now, she was something else entirely. Something new, never conceived until that moment, where love and magic had made her become what she was now.

A *Zomaid*.

With her instincts alert, she did all the thinking very fast. In a swift movement, she grabbed the woman's head with her right hand and, still felling stings on her feet and legs, she walked – towards the door, risking nothing and everything.

The sailors let her pass by, not uttering a word. Their widened eyes and heavy breaths didn't know what to expect from the revolting Zomaid in front of them.

The former mermaid threw the former soon-to-be wife of the captain's head, the deformed and bloody item coloring the deck.

The sailors' eyes shone with fear and devotion, because they knew they faced something that clearly surpassed them. Even if they had swords, no one dared to raise them against her. Her presence soothed them and terrified them at the same time.

"Your captain will survive," she said. "I will save him, just like I did some nights ago, and I will kill who tries against his life. Understood?"

Only one dared to speak.

"Yes, m'lady."

Satisfied with the obedience those men displayed, Siren decided to introduce herself properly.

“I am Siren, your Captain’s chosen.” Her harsh, authoritative voice gave no space to questioning. “Any questions?”

The man closer to her spoke again, and she recognized him from that night she resurfaced and met her Captain, who traveled with part of his crew in search for supplies on land.

“M'lady, we are in need of provisions. Since the Captain’s illness-”

“Worry not. I will provide you help with that.”

Siren never had felt so certain of her words. But she had to guarantee her Captain, her love would remain safe while she was away. Her eyes faced the sailor’s eyes and he trembled, shocked with such intensity.

“I need a favor from you.”

“Yes, m'lady?”

“Protect the Captain while I’m away. I have matters to solve underwater.”

“But if he turns-”

“Restrain him if you must,” she ordered, her face full of rage. Only the mere thought of her Captain’s heartbeat stopping made her fishy blood burn inside her. “But I forbid any of you to kill him.”

And as she walked towards the edge of the ship, preparing to dive, she threatened the entire crew who stared at her as if she were the devil herself.

“If I happen to find the Captain slaughtered when I return, no mercy will rest upon you, for I will punish you all with *death*.”

And before her disappearing inside the dark water of the ocean, all of the sailors eyed the beheaded head of the captain’s former woman, its lifeless, horrific stare shaking all their doubts that Siren, the Zomaid unquestionably would keep her word if contradicted.

“Protect your Captain and you will not regret it. Await my return when the sun dives into the horizon.”

The sailor nodded, and Siren disappeared inside the vastness of the ocean.

Never the witch of the deeps foresaw the visit that invaded her nasty cave without being invited.

“You lying piece of shit!”

The witch didn’t recognize that voice, much less the rage imbibed in that tone. Who dared to treat her with such harshness? As the witch’s eyes

laid upon the transfiguring former Mermaid form, her eyes widened with awe, shocked.

"What? Didn't expect me to return all refined like this? What kind of creature am I, now?"

The witch didn't know. For Neptune, she couldn't even conceive of such a monstrosity.

"What did your potion do to me, witch?"

"I…don't understand, I…"

"*Solve it!"*

The witch trembled at Siren's tone. Her wrath, mixed with desperation, didn't let the witch focus. All she could see was how a little, innocent mermaid had changed into such an insisting creature, whose breathing seemed to inflame the water, making it boil as it exited her nostrils. Siren felt raged, insulted with the witch's attitude. However, as the witch recalled all that had happened with the mermaid and her obsession with the human, it all became so much clearer.

"You've been touched by death, hence the half-transformation."

"What?"

"Did the flesh-eaters touch you in any way?"

The former mermaid's fury seemed to lessen a bit, as she seemed to be immersed in thought, obviously trying to remember.

"One tried to grab my tail once…"

"By the great ocean!"

Panic invaded the witch's speech, but Siren didn't care about that. She had important matters to focus on. So, she stepped towards the witch, her new feet leaving marks on the sand beneath them.

"My captain is not healed. I want him healed, witch. *NOW*!"

"I can't help you, once you have transformed. The magic only works one way."

Words were unspoken and Siren's deathly scales cut one of the witch's tentacles, dark fluid leaving its mark on the water, black waves mingling in the ocean's transparency. The witch screamed, a cry that echoed in the abyss where all those horrendous and frightening marine creatures lived, hidden, far from the luminous king's domain.

"I want a solution. I want my Captain healed! You're a witch, figure it out!"

Black tears came out of the witch's eyes, and with difficulty she grasped a little bottle she had nearby, throwing it to the menacing, deathly creature in front of her, eyeing her with scorn, despising her.

"You can take more of that potion I gave you… but I cannot help you anymore, little mermaid…"

Siren grabbed the bottle and gazed upon the witch with death printed in her eyes. Eyes that had held a more pure, innocent shine once.

"I am not a mermaid anymore…"

"You became… a Zomaid. The first of a kind," the witch whispered.

Siren sighed and eyed the witch cryptically.

"Return to your filthy cave, witch. If I catch a glimpse of your ugly face again, I will end you, and I will make sure it will be painful. Mark my words."

And with that, Siren left, swimming viciously out of the witch's cave, leaving behind her a trail of death.

The witch trembled as she took in the image of her guardian squid quartered in pieces, now serving as a great feast to small scavengers of the sea.

Siren returned to the ship, keeping the potion bottle right next to her heart, as if dear life depended on it.

She would do anything to have her Captain back. This potion would be her last chance to see her one and only desire come true.

Silently she entered the Captain's premises, where the scent of rotten flesh was getting more and more intense.

He was dying, changing, and she felt a pang of despair only for thinking she would lose him forever. Tears escaped her eyes as she helped her sleeping prince drink the contents of that bottle. She made sure he had swallowed every drop of it and then cuddled his form next to her, praying silently for him to wake up healthy and strong, just like the moment they had first met.

And with such beautiful memories she fell asleep, not noticing the sun was high in the sky, not minding she had returned hours before sunset and that the Captain's crew was getting more and more nervous by the minute.

Loudly and menacing, the crew invaded the Captain's premises, determined to take justice into their own hands.

"Riot!" one of them shouted, raising his sword and breaking the door that separated the revolting mass of men from a dying, decaying corpse with a fair, marine creature crying over the Captain's body, who wasn't breathing anymore.

Her eyes met them, the ones invading that space of mourning. The sadness and misery in her eyes almost rendered the men speechless, but the desire of killing overlapped the traces of mercy that some of them felt.

They were human and needed to eat to live, and all of them knew what would happen to their Captain soon. Destiny wasn't merciful. As well as the certainty that, once touched by flesh-eaters, there was no coming back.

So now, that grieving, beautiful marine creature was standing in their way. Siren's beauty was enraged, blinded by powerful feelings.

"You will all pay a high price for your treachery!" She snarled, standing and covering her Captain's body out of sight with her own. Clouds suddenly covered the twilight sky, a fog suddenly rising.

"May the sea have no mercy on you! May the waves swallow you and squeeze your filthy body of vitality and air."

Siren's voice seemed to echo in the night, the ship rocking with the waves that had formed all of a sudden, as if in consonance with her words.

The rioting crew felt lost, not knowing what to do. Should they kill the creature that seemed to be summoning Neptune from the depths?

"May the creatures on shore tear your flesh, dismember your bodies and make you all squirm with agony and pain!"

Lightning bathed the sky, illuminating the whole ship with a renewed perspective. Siren's face and posture looked as fabulous as terrifying, but she wasn't the reason why all the crew seemed to fall back in awe.

A new element had been added to the crew. Someone had risen from the dead.

"Siren."

A male voice sounded, and the former mermaid couldn't believe her ears.

Captain?

As she turned, her eyes met his. The potion had worked. He was alive, breathing, but his eyes… his eyes were different.

The Captain looked unusual, changed. The potion had had an unexpected effect on him, a human touched by death as well.

Just like Siren, the Captain's face, posture and skin were modified into something not yet seen. He was a man that bordered on the flesh-eater appearance, with the delicacy and the brains of a human. Half-living, half-dead, the Captain was neither human nor flesh-eater. He had become so much more.

"You're… alive." She breathed, her voice barely a whisper.

"I am."

"My Captain!" Siren said, resting her hand on his cheek. "Will you keep your word?"

Anxiety ate at her inside, at the possibility of her Captain not wanting her. Her father's words had haunted her since then.

But the Captain smiled, and stared at her tenderly.

"How can I deny you, Siren? How fiercely you fought for me and my survival. I have never known anyone with such devotion."

Siren smiled with teary eyes. She felt happiness, she felt whole. The sight of her half-dead Captain consumed her sanity, her rationality. Love was all she could feel. Love was all she wanted to give him.

However her Captain spoke again, his eyes changing and focusing now avidly on the crew whose tongues seemed to be eaten by fear.

"But now you must excuse me, my dear." He said, with an evil smirk on his face."I happen to be very hungry."

It seemed the Captain had inherited the flesh-eater's appetite for fresh meat.

As the Captain feasted on the crew's bodies, Siren smiled, the raspy sound of her laughter echoing in the night as her lovely voice once had, with her beautiful, soprano's nature.

Silently the ship met land and the flesh-eaters on shore welcomed their new leaders, half-breeds created for the sake of a mermaid who had fallen in love with a human.

Hand in hand, both walked onto shore, leaving behind a ghost ship of potential candidates that would rise eventually and join them on land, all together with the rest.

And so began an era in which flesh-eaters wouldn't wander randomly, abandoned to instinct.

Flesh-eaters would evolve. Inevitably, mankind would face the danger of extinction, as well as all the marine ecosystem.

But all Siren could do was smile, following her Captain, planting terror and gathering death were they passed.

And so they lived happily ever after.

“DON'T CRY WOLF!”

Dusty Davis

1.

The police cruiser squealed to a stop, throwing up dirt and debris in its wake. Bruce Lucas jumped out of the car and was immediately assaulted by the rain. It came down fast and hard, drenching him by the time he made it to the porch of the two story colonial. He rang the doorbell with a soaked arm and waited as a soft melody played throughout the home.

With his palm on the butt of his gun that was holstered on his hip, Bruce hit the button two more times. When the melody faded again, he heard footsteps approaching the door and saw the curtain at the side window fall back into place. A second later the door was pulled open and a young woman wearing flannel pajamas was standing in the frame.

“Can I help you?” She asked as she stifled a yawn with the back of her hand.

“Sorry to bother you ma’am but we received a phone call from this address from a young boy stating that he was in some sort of trouble,” Bruce informed the young woman.

“Trouble?” The woman asked as her eyes widened. “It’s just me and my son that live here and we were both in bed. Please come in,” she told Bruce, stepping to the side of the door allowing him to come inside. “Darren come down here please,” she yelled at the foot of the stairs that led up to the second floor.

A moment later a young teenage boy came trotting down the steps with a smile on his face. He took a look at Bruce in his soaked police uniform and chuckled under his breath.

“Son we received a call from a young man from this address who said that he needed our help. Did you make that call?” Bruce asked the teenager who stood at the bottom of the stairs with a smug look on his face.

“Me, no. Why would I do that? There is nothing wrong here,” the boy answered as his smile grew wider.

“Son, it is a serious offense to call the police claiming to need help, when you don’t. You could be arrested.”

“I didn’t do anything and I didn’t call anyone,” Darren said, getting in Bruce’s face. “Now if you will excuse me, I have to get up early for school in the morning,” he told Bruce before turning and strutting back up the stairs to his room.

“I apologize for my son’s attitude officer, but if he said that he didn’t make the call then I believe him. Is there anything else that I can do for you?” She asked as she walked him back to the front door and opened it for him.

“No ma’am, I believe we are done here,” Bruce told the young mother and stepped back out into the pouring rain.

2.

Tiffany Walker was startled awake by a noise that she couldn’t place. She sat up in bed and listened but the noise didn’t return. After a few moments, she threw the covers to the floor and climbed out of bed. The hardwood was cold under her feet so she slipped them into a pair of slippers and left her bedroom.

A television set blared in the hallway and she walked towards the noise. It was coming from Darren’s room. She pushed her son’s bedroom door open and peeked inside. He was sleeping with one arm dangling over the side of the mattress and resting on the floor. She tip toed into the room and shut the TV off and stepped back out into the hallway.

She descended the stairs and went into the kitchen. The refrigerator hummed as she grabbed a half of a gallon of milk out and took a swig straight from the carton. Tiffany screwed the cap back on and was about to put it back in the fridge when a noise sounded from behind the house, startling her. She dropped the jug to the floor where it splattered everywhere.

“Crap,” she said out loud to herself as the noise came again, making her look up from the mess that she had made to the window. It was a high pitched whine that sounded like an animal. She went to the window and peered out into the night. A full moon lit up the small backyard allowing her to see that it was empty.

As she turned away from the window, she heard a deep, menacing growl. Tiffany spun on her feet as something pounded and scratched on the back door, trying to get in. She wanted to turn and run but she couldn’t take

her eyes from the door. A black shape appeared at the window and smashed into the glass, shattering it. Glass fell to the kitchen floor.

Tiffany spun on her heels and ran back up the stairs the way she had come, yelling for her Darren the whole way up. He was already at the top of the steps when she got there and could see the panic in her eyes. He pulled out his cell phone and called the police as she grabbed his arm and pulled him into her bedroom.

She closed the door with a thud as heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs down the hallway. “What is it?” Darren asked with a shaking voice.

“Some wild animal. It broke the kitchen window to get inside,” Tiffany told him, trying to catch her breath from her run. “Here help me with this,” she said grabbing a hold of the dresser drawer by the bed. They pulled it to the door, barricading themselves inside.

A moment later there was a thud on the door as the creature tried to get inside. Darren screamed as Tiffany searched the bedroom for something that she could use as a weapon until the police arrived. She unplugged a lamp from the wall and wrapped the cord around its base and held the thing upside down like a baseball bat.

A growl filled the hallway as a pounding began on the door. The wood splintered and an arm appeared that was covered in dark fur. Sharp claws protruded from the fingers that sliced through the wood like butter. The monster broke the door down and stood in the frame allowing Tiffany to admire its body.

It stood over six feet and was covered head to toe in black fur that was matted to its skin from the rain. If sniffed the air with a snout that was long and pointy. Saliva dripped from its open mouth as it began to come at them. Tiffany stepped in front of her son who stood there staring at the creature with eyeballs as big as saucers.

She met the creature halfway across the room and swung the lamp at its head. It smashed the monster and shattered, spilling glass to the floor. The animal staggered but didn’t fall. Tiffany didn’t let up, with a sharp piece of glass from the lamp that was still clutched in her bleeding fingers, she jabbed at the creature. Its skin was as hard as rubber and the glass wasn’t large enough to penetrate the monster.

With a powerful back hand the creature swung its massive arm and cracked Tiffany in the jaw, sending her flying across the room. She landed

sideways on the floor with a thud. Pain shot up her arm like a bolt of lightning.

The monster turned its sights on Darren who was cowering behind the bed. The creature pounced and in one single leap was over the bed and on top of Darren. The weight of the monster drove the boy to the floor, stealing the breath from his lungs. He felt the monster's sharp teeth ripping his skin from his body before he could even get air back into his lungs.

Tiffany managed to get back up to her feet but wasn't able to move her right arm. She saw the monster on top of her son and attacked. She flared with her good arm that now held the glass, sticking the monster as many times as she could. It stood, flinging her from its back, with a piece of flesh pierced in its teeth.

She hit the floor again but rolled right back up to her feet as the monster stared at her with blood oozing from its mouth to the floor. Tears stung her eyes as she tried not to cry for her son who was lying in a heap on the floor with half of his skin ripped from his body. She backed slowly away from the monster until she was stopped by the wall. Unable to fight the tears any longer, Tiffany let them out as she slid down the wall to the floor.

The creature dropped down to all fours like an animal and slowly stalked over to her. The monster let out a howl in victory before it pounced on her.

3.

Bruce Lucas pulled up to the two story colonial for the second time. He was going to haul that punk kid Darren off to jail he thought as he climbed the stairs to the porch. Again he rang the bell and listened to the soft melody emanating from inside. He waited for another minute before he hit the button again.

He began to worry when he didn't hear any movement from inside. Turning the knob he found the door unlocked and inched it open with his boot.

"Police", he yelled as he stepped across the threshold. A clock ticking somewhere in the house was the only response that he received. He stepped further into the dark house with his hand on the butt of his gun when he heard glass shattering from upstairs.

Bruce bolted up the steps, taking them two at a time. At the top he paused so he could listen. Silence had returned to the house. There were three doorways in the hallway, two of them were closed but the third at the end of the hall was lying in pieces on the floor. He pulled the gun from his holster and made his way to the back bedroom.

With the gun held out in front of him, he stepped in through the doorframe and immediately saw the carnage. Limbs were scattered across the room, lying in pools of blood. The remains of the young mother were crumpled in a heap against the wall.

Bruce cautiously stepped further into the house of death and found Darren behind the bed. His body looked like it had been mauled by a rabid animal. Grief overcame him for taking his time in responding to the call. He was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't notice the wind blowing in through the shattered window and a dark shape leaping down from the second story to the ground below and running across the yard.

THE CELLAR DOOR

Tera Fulbright

The dream never changes.

I am in a dark room, waiting, wearing only my shift. The barest hint of light, from a window so high up, reflects upon a fine black gown of satin and lace with silver sparkles that waits on a dressmakers form.

The dream never changes.

I can hear the footsteps as someone approaches the room. The door opens and a tall shadow is illuminated by bright lights. I close my eyes tightly and always, always wake up.

The dream never changes.

I open my eyes to the worn and cracked ceiling of the cellar. The dawn light is beginning to make its way across the floor and soon I will hear the shouts and screeches of the rest of the house. Rising from my pallet, I slide on the black worn slippers and pull the faded black dress over my head. My mourning is long over for my sisters and father but the black dress is nearly all I have remaining and so I wear it.

After dressing, I begin the climb up the old wooden stairs to the kitchen. Upstairs, the fire has gone cold so I blow on the embers and coax it back to life. As I feed kindling to the fire, I begin to hear the bells ringing from my Stepmother and Stepsisters.

A sigh escapes me. I quickly move around the kitchen, warming water over the small fire, filling cups of tea and making porridge. The bells continue to ring and soon I begin to hear the screeches of my name…

"Cyndra!"

"Cyndraaaaaa!"

"Cynnnndra!"

I make the trays and carefully carry them up the stairs. By the time I arrive, my two step-sisters have made their way to stepmother's room.

"It's about time." Breda snaps. Her black hair is already done in fine ringlets which would have been flattering if not for the child-like ribbons of pink that are woven into them. Her black eyes glare at me from a pale face while her thin lips grow even thinner when pressed together in a frown.

"Just put the tray on the table and take up the laundry," my stepmother adds. Stepmother is lying in bed, still in her dressing gown; her

gray –not silver– hair still up in rollers. She had been beautiful in her prime but now she just looks old.

Amara sniffs loudly. She's dressed in her favorite pink gown. While her hair is also still in rollers, her make-up is caked on like a mask.

I offer a small curtsey as I place the tray on the table in the room and turn for the laundry.

"Cyndra." My step mother's voice cracks like a whip. Her thin hands reach over and caress the black wood cane beside the bed.

I barely keep from flinching as I turn, "Yes, Madame?"

"Breakfast was late. Make sure you report to the overseer for punishment."

"Yes, Madame."

"Tomorrow I expect it to be here before my daughters reach this room."

"Yes, Madame." I keep my voice soft and low, respectful, as I pick up the laundry and head downstairs. I can either report to the overseer and get the punishment over with or I can wait until after the chores and perhaps gain a bit of respite by waiting.

As much as it pains me, I decide that I am better off waiting. Scrubbing and hanging the clothes will be difficult enough without the stripes from the whip across my back.

It is nearly evening before I finish the chores. Several times during the day, my stepfamily has found other things for me to do. I knew that if I didn't report to the overseer before nightfall, my punishment would be worse. I hurry the dinner along and place it quickly on the dining room table. Calling to my sisters, I run outside and down to the fields.

The overseer is just turning away from the fields when I reach him. He stops as he sees me running toward him.

"Punishment, Cyndra?"

"Yes, Overseer."

"What did you do today?"

"Breakfast was late, Overseer."

The overseer, a large burly man with thick corded muscles, glances up at the setting sun. "And you are just now coming to see me?"

"I wanted to make sure the chores were compete first, Overseer."

The overseer frowns, "That defeats the purpose of punishment, Cyndra. Turn around."

I nod and lift my dress over my head. The whip cracks. I flinch. The whip cracks again. I bite my bottom lip to keep from crying out. The whip cracks.

I shudder.

"Enough." The overseer says. "Finish your chores. Going forward, you will report yourself to me immediately if Madame orders it."

"Yes, Overseer." I reply and pull my dress back down over my shift. I knew when I return to my room, I'll need to sew up the shift. The harsh black dress sends scathing flames across my back. I slowly make my way back to the main house.

As I approach, I see an unfamiliar coach in front of the house. I lift up my skirts and dash toward the back door. Flying through the halls, I fling the main door open, breathing heavily to face a very bemused royal courier.

"Message from the Palace." The courier says, smirking at my dishevelment.

"Thank you. I will take it." I say, reaching for the envelope.

"It will reach Madame?" The courier says, eyeing me.

"Of course." I reply shortly, taking the envelope forcefully from his hand. "Thank you." I say quickly before turning my back and pushing the door closed with my foot.

The envelope is sealed with the royal crest in a deep red wax. I glance down the hall to the drawing room where by now Madame and my step-sisters will be reclining after the evening meal. For a moment, I hesitate, torn between my own wish to find my bed and the displeasure I face from Madame if I delay in bringing her the message.

I take a deep breath and square my shoulders. Straightening my dress, I walk toward the drawing room, knocking once at the door.

"Yes," hisses the sharp voice of my stepmother.

"A message from the palace, Madame."

"The Palace!"

"Let me see!" My two stepsisters tumble over themselves to reach the letter falling into a pile on the floor. With long gliding steps that seem to belie the use of the cane at her side, Madame reaches out an arm and plucks the message from my hand.

With a long red fingernail, she breaks the wax seal and begins to read.

“There’s to be a ball. For Winter Solstice. Three balls! One each night, leading up to the one on Solstice which will be a Masquerade!”

“Oh, Mother, how exciting!”

“We must have new gowns.”

Madame frowns.

“What is it, mother?” Breda asks.

“It says here, that every maiden is commanded to attend.”

“Why, that means I can go!” I say, excitement filling me for the first time since my father and sisters’ deaths.

“What! As if you had anything to wear!” sniffs Amara.

“Really,” adds Breda, “It’s not as if you can go to the ball in that old dress.”

“But…”

My stepmother holds up a hand.

“Enough, girls. I agree that you must have new gowns for the ball. Cyndra can have a few of your older ones. You can make do with that, can’t you? I can’t afford new gowns for all three nights for all of you.”

I bite my tongue, piecing together two decent gowns, let alone a third for the masquerade would be difficult based on my dear stepsisters’ tastes, but it is the best chance I have of getting anything newer than rags.

I nod and offer a deep curtsy. “Of course, Madame. I would be happy to use my sisters’ older gowns for myself.”

“Stepsisters.” Breda says, stepping on my toes as she stands up from the floor.

“Yes, stepsisters.” Amara adds quietly, somehow managing to step on the same foot as she rises.

“That’s good, child,” my stepmother murmurs, her eyes already back on the letter, “Go to bed now, girls. We’ll go into the city tomorrow to get you new dresses.”

“Yes, Mother,” the sisters chorus.

“Oh, and Cyndra,” my stepmother looks up from the paper.

“Yes, Madame,”

“You do realize that attending the balls is contingent upon finishing your duties here.”

“Yes, Madame.”

“Good,” she waves me off with a hand.

I quickly run down to the cellar and slip off the black gown and begin repairing my shift. I have another one but it was in much better shape and I wanted to keep it for the ball.

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The dream never changes.

I am in a dark room, waiting, wearing only my shift. The barest hint of light, from a window so high up, reflects upon a fine black gown of satin and lace with silver sparkles that waits on a dressmakers form.

The dream never changes.

I can hear the footsteps as someone approaches the room. The door opens and a tall shadow is illuminated by bright lights. I close my eyes tightly and always, always wake up.

The dream never changes.

The next morning, I quickly wake and prepare for the day. A pile of dresses in every color, shape and size have been thrown carelessly down the stairs. I pick them up and neatly lay them out in the cellar. With the family gone, I will have time to get most of the chores done early which will, in turn, allow me time to work on the dresses that my sisters have left me.

The day passes quickly and when the girls return, they are decked out in the most current fashions. Tightly corseted, faces made up, their hair in ringlets.

I have barely finished adjusting one of the dresses from the pile, when I hear stepmother calling.

"Girls, the carriage has arrived."

I quickly slip into the dusky blue dress and plain black slippers that I had re-dyed and run up the cellar stairs only to find the door is stuck. I push and pull and shout, but to no avail.

I hear Stepmother shout once. "Cyndra. Now, child, if you are coming!"

But within moments, I hear the sound of the carriage pulling away. I sit down on the stairs and cry.

I could only hope that in a fit of pique one of my sisters had locked the door and they would open it upon their return in the morning so I could get on with my duties.

At least there were still another two days of balls. I take a deep breath and calm my thoughts. Walking down the stairs, I begin removing the dress and lay it carefully down.

Left in my shift, I start toward the pallet to lie down when I suddenly see motion at the top of the stairs. I look and there at the top of the stairs are two shadowy shapes.

"Who's there?"

The shapes don't move. I reach for a candle and, holding it in front of me, raise it up toward the stairs. There in the shadow of the door, illuminated in the light of the candle, stand the very image of my two dead sisters, looking down on me with sad eyes. The blue eyed, blonde twins are pale shadows of themselves.

"What shades are you?" I shudder. "Why have you come back?" I whisper.

The shades point toward the door.

"It's locked."

One of them shakes her head and points again. Still holding the light close to me, I walk cautiously up the stairs, reaching over the ghosts, I push on the door. It swings open easily.

My heart leaps to my throat. "I can go!" I start to turn back down the stairs toward the dress but the other ghost shakes her head and points out the door.

"I can't go?" My heart falls again but then I walk out.

There in the large fireplace of the kitchen stands a beautiful full gown, deep, dark, red – the color of blood. The ghostly twins now appear in front of it and point toward it.

"I'm to wear that dress?" My eyes widen in shock.

They nod. I walk toward the dress, afraid that if I touch it, it will disappear. But it doesn't. The satin is smooth and shiny. I slip it off the dress form and step into it. It fits me perfectly. I glance down and there beside the form are deep red slippers, the same shade as the dress. I slide the slippers on to my feet and turn to the shades. They are gone.

"Thank you, little sisters." I whisper.

I step out the kitchen door to find a blood red coach and black horse waits for me. The coachman doesn't speak as he opens the door and helps me in. We race toward the ball.

The castle is all I've ever dreamed. Decorated for a winter ball– the theme of this one seems to be red poinsettias. They are everywhere; in the halls, along the walls, on every table. The color of my dress seems to match perfectly. Elsewhere, the nobility is gathering in small groups, sipping red wine from tall red glasses, watching the dance floor, waiting for the prince to appear.

All during the ball, I dance and smile. Avoiding my sisters and stepmother is not hard at all in the crowds. Their garish gowns of green and pink stand out amongst the crowd and though mine seems to be the only red dress, it is a red in a sea of blues and purples.

I am not sure but I think I even dance with the prince once. It might not have been him, but when this beautiful man with dark hair and green eyes the color of leaves asks me dance, the floor clears for us. He is beautiful, all dressed in white. But as soon as the dance ends, I begin to fear that my stepmother might have seen me, so I bow away and run outside. The clock begins to chime midnight.

The coach is waiting for me and drives me home. I undress and place the red gown on the dressmakers form, as soon as I step out of the shoes and place them beside the dress, smoke begins to rise from the fireplace. Soon it covers the form completely and then, as the smoke rises up the chimney, the dressmakers form along with the dress and shoes are gone.

I slowly walk back downstairs, lay on my pallet and close my eyes.

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The dream never changes.

I can hear the footsteps as someone approaches the room. The door opens and a tall shadow is illuminated by bright lights. I close my eyes tightly and always, always wake up.

The dream never changes.

The next morning, I rise and dress, choosing an older gown of brown but when I go to open the door it is still locked. I bang on the door until one

of the maids hears me. She opens the door with a surprised look and I quickly gather the breakfast tray and run upstairs.

Carrying them upstairs, I enter the room where my two step-sisters are talking non-stop about the ball.

"You're late." My stepmother says.

"Someone accidentally locked the cellar door yesterday while I was downstairs. I'm sure it was just one of the maids who wasn't paying attention. It took me a while to get someone to open it this morning."

My stepsisters look at each other, smiling.

My stepmother frowns. "I will forgo your punishment today. But I expect tomorrow's breakfast to be on time."

"Yes, Madame. If I may ask. How was the ball?"

"Oh, it was wonderful! You would never believe…" starts Amara.

"Oh, it was so exciting," interrupts Breda, "There was even a mysterious woman."

"A mysterious woman?" I ask, watching my stepmother carefully.

"Yes," exclaims Amara excitedly, "She wore this deep red gown and had dark hair but no one knew who she was."

"She is probably some foreign princess hoping to become rich by marrying the prince." Breda sniffs, snobbishly.

"Well, then it will be up to you two to impress him with our own homegrown beauty." My stepmother adds.

I smile to myself as I turn away. *A mysterious woman, was I?* The rest of the day passes quietly. My stepsisters not wanting to exert themselves before the ball spend the day reading and lounging. They seem determined to run me to exertion though. Every chance they get, they call me to bring water or fruit, or fetch a book or wave a fan. And of course, every time I get near them, they pinch or poke or step on a toe. By the end of the day, if I finish my own chores, I'm going to be black and blue. Finally, everything is done and I run toward the cellar to dress.

Again, I hear my stepmother call and head up the stairs in the dusky blue dress. But as I open the door a large bucket of dirty dishwater tumbles down the stairs spilling onto me and my dress.

I walk out into the kitchen sopping wet. The dress clings to me like a wet sack and my hair, I know, looks and smells like dirty dishwater.

Madame walks in, her cane tapping angrily on the stone floor. "Cyndra!" she starts then stops at the sight of me, "Good heavens, child.

You can’t go to the ball looking like that!”

“No, Madame.” I look miserably down at my dress and then back at her.

She hides a quick smile. “Ah well, there is always tomorrow. I’m sorry, child.”

“Yes, Madame. Good night, Madame.” I turn on my heel and walk back down into the cellar. It had been too much to hope that one night would have been enough for my sisters.

I sit down and take off the dress, hanging it up on the tattered screen to dry. I try to keep from crying but soon tears fall unceasingly down my cheeks. I am so angry it hurts.

I can’t help but be mad at my stepsisters, my stepmother, my father for dying and for taking my two sisters with him. Even though in my heart I know it wasn’t really his fault, no more than it had been my sisters' fault that my own mother died. But somehow it all seems so unfair.

As I lay sulking, I hear the sound of the cellar door open. I look up. There in the shadows again, stand my two sisters.

I stood up. Was it too much to hope for? I walk up the stairs and out into the kitchen. There in the fireplace stands a golden gown of silk and tiny gold slippers. My two sisters' ghosts stand in front of it, smiling, but sad eyes still look at me.

I kneel down before them. “Thank you,” I say. “I wish I could hug you, but I want you to know how much I appreciate this.”

I stand up and reach out a hesitant hand toward the dress. When I look back down, the girls are gone. “I miss you, Iittle sisters.”

Outside, a white horse and gold carriage await me. Another evening at the ball passes amazingly. The castle is decorated all in gold. Everyone sips champagne from gilt covered glasses. Gold candelabras reflect candlelight across gold mirrors. I dance with the prince again and the sight of the stepmother peering closely at us dancing scares me so much that I again bow out and run home. The bells are chiming midnight.

The golden dress and slippers disappear in the smoke of the fireplace and I lay down on my pallet, happy for the second time since my father and sisters' death.

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The dream never changes.

I can hear the footsteps as someone approaches the room. The door opens and a tall shadow is illuminated by bright lights. I close my eyes tightly and always, always wake up.

The dream never changes.

The next morning, the entire keep is abuzz with rumors of the Gold Lady and the impression she has made on the prince. It seems that the entire kingdom wants to know who she was. There are even some who think she might have been the same girl as the Red Lady but just as many who think it was a different woman that captured the Prince's eyes last night.

That night it is the final ball, the Winter Solstice Masquerade. I don't dare hope that something would prevent me from going this time and that my ghostly sisters would rescue me. So I make sure to avoid my sisters, finish my chores early, dress and am waiting downstairs in the main hall when the coach arrives.

"Ah, Cyndra. I see you made it this time." My stepmother says with a frown that she quickly hides with a smile. My two sisters stomp down the stairs.

"Yes, Madame."

As we step out into the evening, my two sisters somehow catch me between them, one stepping on the blue dress, the other pushing me down the stairs and straight into a mud puddle. The stone stairs scrape my arms and legs as I tumble down them.

"Oh, dear, Cyndra, I'm so sorry!" Amara says sarcastically, as she rushes down the stairs.

"Yes, I really didn't mean to run into you!" Breda says as she helps me up from the puddle. "Oh, your poor gown." The gown in question has been torn at the hem and is covered in mud.

My stepmother raises an eyebrow and tilts her head. I look down at the dress. I should have known.

I take a deep breath, nod and step back. "It's all right. You go on. Enjoy the ball." I say with a curtsey toward my two step-sisters.

The girls giggle as they step into the carriage. My stepmother eyes me with a frown before she glances pointedly at the door and steps into the carriage herself.

Lifting the torn, ragged and muddy dress I climb back up the stairs and make my way into the kitchen. I don't even bother going down to the cellar. I slide out of the dress and standing there in my shift, throw it into the fireplace.

"I give up." It's not enough that I must wear their bloody hand-me-downs, but they push and shove, keeping me bruised and unhappy. I walk over to the sink and wet a rag. I wipe the cold rag to the bloody scrapes on my legs and arms.

I don't know why I stay. I don't have to stay. I can be a scullery maid anywhere. Surely there are better homes, better places to go. I stand up and begin to pace, crying, frustration filling me until I want to scream. As I turn around, suddenly, there, in the fireplace, nearly hidden by the soot, is another gown. I look around for my sisters' ghosts but I do not see them.

I move closer and pull the gown out into the fading light of day. I nearly drop it on the floor. It is the same gown as in my dream. Black satin and lace. Specks of silver thread woven like stars into the gown. Silver slippers lay to one side and resting around the neck of the gown is a black lace mask with a silver crescent moon carved on one side.

"Oh, thank you, sisters! Thank you!"

I put on the dress and step out into the yard. A black carriage with silver etching, drawn by a horse as black as night, waits for me. We ride!

The castle is decorated for the Masque like a twisted fairyland. Black and silver trees line the halls. Wine is served in black goblets. Black cloths cover the tables with silver candlesticks centered on top.

As the night before, I dance only with the prince. But when the midnight bells begin to ring, it is time for the unmasking, so I run, as I had every night before. This night, however, he chases after me, but I am swifter. Climbing into the carriage, we race home.

As I enter the back door, a bright light is thrust into my face. I cover my eyes with my arms but they are pulled down, grasped and held tightly behind me. I squint into the light.

"Hold her!" snaps the voice of my stepmother.

She walks toward me, towering over me and removes the mask. "I thought so," she says, smirking. "Your reaction to not going to the ball…

was entirely… too…nice." She slaps my cheek. I taste blood.

"Where did you get the dresses? Did you steal them?"

"My sisters gave them to me!"

Madame slaps me again. "Liar! My daughters have never owned anything as fine as those dresses. And you certainly could not have made anything like that out of the rags my daughters gave you."

"Not your daughters. My sisters!" I shoot back, struggling against the arms holding me.

Madame raises her hand to strike again. "Bah, it matters not." She lowers her hand. "All that matters is that the prince does not realize that you are the girl he seeks."

I struggle harder against the arms holding me. "You can't!"

"Undress her," my stepmother commands. "Carefully. Do not damage the dress. I want her to remember this night."

My stepsisters step out from behind her. They squeal with joy as they grab hold and strip the dress and shoes from me. They are not gentle; raking fingers across the scrapes I'd already received. They begin to squabble over the dress.

I realize it is the overseer who holds me. "Let me go!" I shout. He only tightens his grip on my arms.

"Girls, put the dress on the form and leave us."

"Yes, mother," they chorus. They turn and give me an ugly smile as they walk arm in arm out the door.

"Give me your whip." Madame commands the overseer. "Turn her around. Hold her. Tightly." Her voice is like steel.

The overseer complies. And with only the shift protecting me, Madame cracks the whip across my back, time and time again.

I scream and struggle with the overseer who holds my hands over my head.

Finally, when I have no voice left to scream, blood drips down my legs and my shift lies mostly in rags around me, the overseer reaches out and stops the whip.

"You will kill her," he says.

"I should." My stepmother breaths heavily, but she stops. "But I won't. I want her to remember this day for a very long time. Put her in the cellar and take that dress with you."

The overseer lifts me up gently and carries me down into the cellar. He lays me on the bed face down where I begin to cry. A few minutes later, he returns with the dress and slippers, placing them in the room.

He walks back up stairs and I hear the heavy wooden bar come down over the door. The room is dark. It is as if my life ends today.

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The dream never changes.

I am in a dark room, waiting, wearing only my shift. The barest hint of light from a window so high up reflects upon a fine black gown of satin and lace with silver sparkles that waits on a dressmakers form.

The dream never changes.

I can hear the footsteps as someone approaches the room. The door opens and a tall shadow is illuminated by bright lights. I close my eyes tightly.

"She's down there." The overseer's voice echoes in the small room.

I open my eyes. The shadow approaches. It is the prince, only his clothes are torn and bloody… and his sword…his sword drips blood onto the cellar floor.

"Are you Cyndra?" he asks, kneeling beside me.

I try to rise, flinching from the wounds, clasping the tattered remains of my shift around me.

"I am."

"Are you the Red Lady, the Gold Lady and the Queen of the Night?"

"I am."

"Then will you be my wife and queen?"

"I will." He reaches for me and takes me in his arms.

We kiss.

As he carries me up the stairs, I see two littler blond haired runners dressed in Madame's livery peeking around the overseer's body. When they see me, they smile, and their eyes are no longer sad.

***

"Hold her. Tightly."

The overseer tightens his arms. The whip cracks and blood begins to pour from the wounds. He reaches out and stops the next blow. He lays the body down on the cot.

"Now what?" He asks.

"Let's start with my stepmother next."

"Yes, Princess."

LETTERS FROM THE DEVIL
A short story based on The Grimm Fairy Tale "The Girl Without Hands"

Angela Meadon

The boy's hands trembled as he held the parchment in his small fingers. The paper shook in time with his rapid breathing. He was only seven years old, but he understood the meaning of the words written there. He read the florid script once more, hoping that he had made a mistake;

My Trusted Servant

My heart is heavy at the news you have delivered. I had hoped for a happy life for my wife, who has already endured so much, but I cannot allow this monstrosity to survive.

You will kill the infant and its mother with all haste. The Kingdom cannot know of my shame in this matter and the Queen must be punished for bringing one such as him into the world.

I command you to kill them both and keep their hearts as proof.

I am sorry to force this burden onto your shoulders, my friend, but I am sure you understand.

Roderick.

The boy ran the tips of his fingers along the sigil that his father had sealed the letter with. He traced the majestic lines of the beast's wings and tail. His eyes stung as water brimmed out of them. He wiped a tear from his cheek with a rough swipe.

He'd always felt different, and not just because he was the son of the king who had not returned from war. There was something inside of him that twisted and darkened his thoughts. Was it grief?

Anger welled up in his chest, a bitter wave of hatred for the man who had ordered his death when he was a newborn. The boy crushed the parchment into a ball and only stopped when his fingers ached from the pressure.

His mother had told him that his father was coming home in the morning. She had also told him that they would not be able to greet him. Then she had given him the letter and walked out of his bed chamber.

They would kill him in the morning. And *she* would do nothing to prevent it.

The boy walked to the window. His bed chamber was high up in the eastern tower of the castle, the village and farmlands spread out below like an intricate model. He rested his palms on the cold stone of the portal and looked up at the night sky. A cool wind tousled his blonde locks as he contemplated the stars.

Gregor, his teacher, had told him that the stars were the hearts of ancient dragons. Once the knights had slain the dragons, their souls had ascended into the heavens where they shone down upon the world every night to remind men of their great deeds. Men like the king.

Gregor's hands were creased with deep lines and he always had dirt under his fingernails from tending his herbs. Would Gregor do anything to prevent his execution?

The boy sighed. He would have to do something himself. All the people in the castle loved his father. No one here would do anything to defy the king. *King Roderick is so fair*, they said, *King Roderick always looks after us.*

Yet King Roderick had ordered his queen and infant son murdered! That was why his mother was always so sad, always holding him close and telling him that they must treasure their time together. She'd known all along and done nothing!

The boy turned away from the window. He would have to take care of himself.

Mornings in the castle of Farwen were always busy, filled with the sounds of servants preparing warm baths and hot breakfasts. Birdsong drifted on the honey-porridge-scented air while the thick stone walls held the sounds of the village at bay. This morning was different. This morning the castle hummed with activity.

The king would return before the sun was two fists above the horizon. Already his outrider had entered the castle gates to brief the Guard Captain.

The boy watched from his window as servants swept the courtyard, again, and hung wreaths of fresh flowers, again. Would they hang him too?

A loud knock rang on the wooden door of his chamber and he waited sullenly to see who had come to take him to his execution.

These are dark thoughts for a boy, a voice spoke in his head. It was a familiar voice, one he heard often and his mother referred to as his Imaginary Friend.

His jaw clenched when he saw his mother in the doorway. She was wearing a gown of fine silk. Lace caressed her slender neck and delicate arms. Her hands were covered by gloves as white as moonlight.

She looked beautiful, but the boy could see the pain in her red-rimmed eyes and the way she held her body stiff as she walked.

"Daniel," her voice quivered like a bowstring when she talked. "I need you to come to the Great Hall, son."

The boy looked straight into her eyes. Cold hatred rose within him and he poured it into his voice he spoke: "Why mother? What is in the hall?"

She shuddered and swallowed deeply before she spoke. "Just come, boy. Don't ask questions."

"Can I meet my father before you kill me?" the boy's words echoed in the stone passage outside his bedroom. "Will you do it or will someone else?"

His mother walked ahead of him, her slippers whispering along the immaculate red carpet that lined the hall. She held her body rigid as a maypole and folded her arms in front of her.

"Will you even be able to kill me with those fake hands?"

"Enough!" She spun on her heel and crouched in front of him. "Do you think this is easy for me? Do you think I wouldn't do *anything* to save you? You are my son. My blood runs through your veins." She stood and started walking again, words spilling out of her mouth like maggots from a corpse. "I do not know why he ordered it, but he did. We were fortunate to have had any time together. Seven years, is that all I get? Why? Why didn't he die on that battlefield and release us from this fate?"

When you strike a deal with the devil, you'd better be prepared to pay, a hint of amusement colored the voice in Daniel's head.

The boy sat in a heavy wooden chair beside his mother. The table had been set with a great feast; roast duck, honeyed figs, fresh-cut fruit and vegetables of every description. The boy was only allowed a bowl of oats.

"The feast is for your father," the Queen said as she carefully lifted a silver fork, piled high with scrambled eggs, to her mouth. The hands

attached to her wrists were cast from silver and modelled on those of a beautiful young girl from the village. A leather strap held the fork steady in her right hand.

When the king had first met his mother, as she stole peaches from his orchards with the help of an angel, she had sported a pair of painful stumps instead of hands.

“Tell me what happened to your hands, mama?” The boy asked in his sweetest voice. Perhaps now, with his death imminent, she would tell him the story she had refused to relate all his life.

The Queen wiped at her mouth with a silk napkin and looked into his eyes.

“Very well,” she said. “When I was a child my father met the devil. The devil told him that he would make my father very wealthy in exchange for what stood behind his mill. My father thought the devil was referring to an apple tree and he agreed. But it was I who stood behind the mill.

“Three years later the devil returned, but I had kept myself pure and he could not take me. He insisted that my father cut off my hands as payment. My father objected but I allowed him to do it.

“Because I was so pure, the devil had to give me up, but I could not live in my father’s house anymore and I set off into the world.”

The boy stared at her for a long time, thinking she would continue, but she was finished.

“The devil is just a story to frighten little kids,” he said.

“And yet…” his mother held up her silver hands and tears started to run down her cheeks.

“My Lady,” an old woman hurried up to the table and the boy recognised her as one of the kitchen servants. “It is time. The king approaches.”

“Thank you Gladys,” the Queen said to the woman before dismissing her. “I cannot give you what you asked for. Our hearts must be cold before they are presented to the king. I only hope he does not question why yours is so large.”

She drew two small vials from a pouch on the table.

“I had Petrus the Alkhemist prepare this. It is a powerful poison that will stop our hearts immediately. We will feel no pain.”

The boy reached out for the vial. In the moment before he took it, he knocked both to the floor. The fragile bottles cracked open and an oily

liquid oozed out onto the wooden floorboards.

"No!" His mother cried out as the poison sank into the floorboards. She struck him across the cheek. Sparks flared behind his eyes and a sharp agony exploded in his mouth.

He looked at her, hatred burning through his veins. He felt ten times stronger than normal. His left hand reached out toward the table and closed around the ivory handle of a carving knife.

"It's heart's-out time, mother."

The floorboards would never be the same again. The boy watched the crimson pool spreading across the polished oak lengths and seeping into the joins. The flow had slowed now. The steady *drip-drip-drip* dwindling as her body ran dry.

He turned the knife in his hand. Perhaps hanging her from the rafters, like a human chandelier, had been too much.

He smiled.

She would have killed him if he hadn't acted first. All her talk of devils and bargains, he scoffed. She had made the bargain that gave him seven years of life. He would not allow her to make a bargain to take his life away.

Heavy footsteps rang through the hall. They were followed by a low, agonised moan that crystallized into pain-wracked words.

"No, no, no, no, no…what have you done?"

The boy looked into the face of a stranger. Yet he saw something of himself in the shape of the jaw, the color of the eyes.

"Hello father."

The king reached up and untied the rope around the queen's ankles. He gently lowered her lifeless body to the floor.

"What have you done boy? How could you do this?"

"My name is Daniel."

The king looked at him in horror for a long moment. He looked away from his son and buried his face in the queen's blood-clumped hair. The big man's shoulders shook as he bellowed his grief at the world.

The boy turned the knife in his hand. The sharp blade pressed into his thumb thrilled him. He stepped up next to the king.

"Bye bye."

He plunged the knife into the man's unprotected throat and watched as more hot blood splashed onto the floor.

The room smelled like autumn leaves. Like rust. Like the taste of the sore in Daniel's mouth.

"You protected yourself." The boy recognised the voice, it was his Imaginary Friend.

He turned to the table, the feast now congealing like the blood he stood in. A man sat in the king's chair. His skin was the colour of marble statues and appeared just as smooth. He held out a delicate hand and beckoned for Daniel to come closer.

The boy stepped up in front of the man, the knife forgotten on the floor next to the king's body.

The man held out a piece of paper. "Did your mother show you my letter?"

"This one?" Daniel asked.

"No, this is your father's letter. The one he sent her when he found out you were born. I found the messenger and sent a letter of my own."

Daniel took the parchment from the man. The wax seal was still intact. He ran his fingers along the dragon's sinuous body before cracking it open and rolling out the letter...

My Queen,

Do not bring harm upon our son. Raise him to be good and pure, as you are, and we will make sure he always has a loving home.

I trust you will not punish him for the circumstances of his birth.

I love you, and I love our son.

Roderick

THE FAIREST

K.Z. Morano

My face was a universe. The lines in my irises were sinuous rivers that disbanded to form rivulets, made to merge in the deep dark oceans of my pupils. Deeper within those oceans were worlds beyond the reach of kings, where stars and stones formed cryptic constellations trundling in the unfathomable heavens found deeper and deeper within my presumably perfect soul. The flawless snow-white slopes of my forehead, my cheeks, my nose and my chin… The ebony curl of my eyelash… The corner of my blood-red lips… They all created curves and crannies that hinted at the existence of more secret worlds where a thousand more beautiful and mysterious things may lurk and thrive. I looked into the mirror everyday only to have it tell me what I already knew… That I was the fairest one of all.

My name was Lady Amalie, the wife of a great lord. Apart from that, I knew nothing more. Any memory of a life before that kiss was gone to me. It was a strange thing, to know nothing of oneself yet to listen to the tales sung by troubadours from shore to shore. My entire past spun from the mouths of strangers. People told stories of how the lord woke me from a seemingly perpetual sleep and rescued me from my uncertain dwelling found between death and dreaming. As if that solitary occasion were all that mattered.

It wasn't fair. No one ever asked me if I wanted to go with him.

I suppose I should've been thankful. My husband was as rich as sin, with a home filled with lovely and delicate things. Perhaps I would've been happy if he didn't treat me like one of his possessions, a precious, fragile object to be caressed then stowed along with the other pretty things. He looked at me with a kind of greedy gaze, like how a silk merchant would estimate the value of his wares or how a landowner would consider the worth of his investment. He would be pleased with what he saw and he would sigh contentedly. Some nights he would visit my chambers. He would run his old fingers, gnarled like the roots of ancient trees, along my face... gingerly, as if he were afraid that it would break. And the nerves beneath my skin would die at his touch.

I almost hated my face. But I didn't… couldn't. It was, after all, the only thing that was truly mine, that one truth from a past that neither my lord husband nor the poets could possibly fabricate. And so every day, I would stare at myself in that mirror, as if I could unearth something new from the way one immaculate facial feature would connect with the other.

It was during one of those moments that I saw her. For the first time, the crystalline realm of the looking glass was inhabited by a reflection apart from my own. It disturbed me deeply. That space was meant to be mine and mine alone. But as much as it pained me to share that place with someone else, what truly troubled me was the way she looked. She simply stood there like some appalling apparition, her long hair as black as ravens' feathers, a striking contrast against the deathly pallor of her hands that hung limply at her sides. How old she was or how young, I had no way of telling. Her face was swathed in yellowing bandages, the rest of her body concealed by the dirty-white gown she was wearing.

I could've turned around to face her. I could've screamed. But I didn't. I was paralyzed, unable to feel anything except for the thunderous thumping in my chest and the icy bead of sweat trickling down my spine. I must've fainted, because when I woke up, it was almost as if she had never been. So I dismissed it as nothing more than a dream. Unfortunately, it wasn't. With each day, as I looked into the mirror, her reflection got closer and closer, close enough that I could see the spidery thread of purple veins on her hands and the greyish flesh beneath the bandages that have slowly become undone.

It pained me to part with my cherished mirror. But fear prevailed over vanity and nostalgia. So I draped a blanket over the gleaming polished surface, mourning it as if it were a dead lover, then I asked the servants to take the mirror and all of its dark mysteries to be locked away in the tower. I felt as if I had lost a part of myself. But in spite of my sacrifice, the image of her continued to linger. Her ghastly echoes in the mirror… her face bound in yellow-stained gauze… the haunting hint of a face that lay beneath… all so vivid, as if she were etched into the insides of my eyelids.

The only comfort I found was in the arms of Valtin, the huntsman. I roused, breathed, existed for our secret meetings in the woods. There, veiled underneath the compassionate canopy of trees, he would make me forget the daily horrors of my life in the castle. I would lie on a dew-

covered blanket of grass listening to his skin hiss against mine… and the thousand tiny voices of the forest as each bird and beast and other nocturnal beings called out to their mates. The leaves of the trees would rustle, excited by the wind's passionate kiss. The moon would wax and wane with our breathing, the air around us heavy with the evening blossoms' perfumed sighs. During those moments, it would be as if the whole of nature were sharing in our hearts' jubilation, moved by our magic. Come dawn, I would melt in his arms like a mantle of snow. And I would find myself wishing, hoping with all my heart… Would that my lord husband hasten towards his grave. Would that I were a peasant's daughter and become free to marry my beloved Valtin.

It didn't take long for my wishes to come true. With each day, my lord husband grew older and weaker, consumed by a wasting sickness unknown to men of magic and medicine. Whatever it was, it ate away his flesh so that all that was left was skin and bone to house his gradually fading soul. In his last moments, I stood by his pauperized form. He reached out a withered arm to me. And I held his bony hand like a dutiful lady and wife and I knew that I didn't want him to leave. What would become of me then, I wondered. Who would be there to tell me who I was? Even when I sensed that my entire past had been nothing more but artfully constructed lies condensed into a ballad, still, I needed him there, because that false fable was all that I had.

Even so, I felt him slipping away from my grasp like seawater shying away from the shore. And in his waning ghost of a voice, the last thing that he said to me was: "That face… that face…" He groped my face blindly with his stick-thin fingers, dry twigs defiling the satiny skin. Then he sighed and his spirit went with that last outbreath. The rivers and rivulets in my irises swelled and the flood streamed down the perfect white slopes of my cheeks. It wounded me that even in the brink of death, all he saw in me was my face.

The days wore on and I began to be consumed by a black inward hollowness. This new sadness propelled me to once again visit the mirror that I missed sorely. I went to the tower one day, mounting the long flight of stairs, my chest bursting with proportionate amounts of fear and excitement. I removed the dark cloth from the looking glass ever so slowly, relishing the moment, as if I were undressing my long lost paramour. Then I lovingly

fingered the intricate borders of solid gold and dwarfish stones. I watched with wonder as my warm breath bloomed upon the cold glass. And once again, I became lost in the universe that was my face.

Her presence drew me back to reality. I felt her even before I saw her reflection beside my own. She was right beside me. Her breath against my skin burned like ice; the putrid stench that floated around her assaulted my senses. The bindings that covered her face came completely unraveled. And there was nothing there, only a nebulous grey gibbosity where a face should have been. The amorphous lump billowed and flattened and out came a voice–thick, muffled and slow, as if the sound were swimming through mud.

It said only this one thing: "Face."

From somewhere within me, I found the courage to break from the surface of my paralysis and I ran… out of the room and down the flight of stairs and into the safety of my chambers where I trembled and wept. The creature, whatever or whoever it was, wanted my face.

I longed for Valtin's company, his protective embrace and his quiet strength. But tradition dictated that a widow must mourn. And so I spent my days locked inside the castle, held by layer upon layer of cold, sinister stone as if I too were dead. But what should have been torturous days of waiting turned into a kind of slow, secret solace as I discovered the small, quickly budding life inside me. I knew without doubt that it was Valtin's child that I was carrying. I recognized the steady thrumming of its tiny heart as well as I did my own. And so despite the castle's opaque gloom, I would radiate a glow, as if I were lit by some sacred internal flame. I carried within me an extension of myself and of Valtin. Gradually, I stopped yearning for the past that I have never known and began looking forward to the future. No longer did I feel the need to gaze upon my reflection in the enchanted looking glass. The magic growing inside me was all that I needed.

However, I could still feel the creature's presence lurking somewhere in the shadows. A fresh spurt of terror coursed through my veins. It was no longer for myself but for my unborn child. I rushed to meet Valtin one night, bearing both happy and horrid news. He shared in both my joy and fear like no one else could. As he knelt to press his warm lips against the subtle outthrust of my womb, he vowed to me that he would find the vile creature and present its heart to me.

For the first time in several nights, I slept as soundly as a babe. At least for the first few breaths… I dreamt that I was in a strange place… somewhere between dancing and dying. And indeed I was dancing... round and round in a mechanical ballet… my feet tapping into the ground to a melody conducted from hell. I tried to stop, but I couldn't. My shoes of glowing red-hot iron hissed against my heels, searing my skin. The smell of my own roasting flesh forced its way into my nostrils. Still, the music rose to a maddening crescendo and I felt my own iron-clad feet tap, tap, tap-tap-tapping into the floor as if I were a clockwork toy.

At the edge of my vision, I saw my audience… It was the faceless creature–no longer faceless but wearing mine. She sat on a grand throne bedecked with dwarfish stones. On her head was a coronet and beside her, a prince. My trembling hands crept towards my face only to find nothing there but raw flesh–wet, weeping... I screamed. And how they laughed at me… their faces illuminated by the fire that burned my feet… cackling as if they were witches 'round a howling pyre. But that was not the worst of it. Despite the agonizing pain, I felt the blood trickling down my thighs. I felt the fragile life inside me dissolving and seeping out of my womb. The music came to a cacophonous halt, a lone string instrument scratching against the air. Then I fell dead into the ground.

I bolted upright from my bed, bathed in ice-cold sweat. I looked down and through a pale streak of moonlight, saw my blankets blooming with blood. Aware that I was no longer dreaming, my screams shattered the bitter air.

The days passed and I remained inconsolable, secretly dreading the night that I would meet with Valtin and bring him the excruciating news. The hollow space in my womb still ached where the innocent blossoming life had been. And I wished with all the strength that was left in me that on that night, Valtin would offer me that monstrous creature's heart.

The night came and the moon shone brightly like a pearl pinned into the sky's black velvet-clad bosom. I walked into the forest, my footfalls muffled by the thick mist. The trees stood like sinister sentinels and the night caused familiar things to take on frightening shapes. I called out to Valtin and my small voice squeaked into the breeze, several small echoes squeaking after it. When he didn't answer, I delved deeper into the woods, ignoring the chill that prickled my skin.

Then, it seemed to me, that it began to rain. But only where I stood. The first few droplets fell onto my head with a steady pat, pat, pat… And the sticky liquid dribbled down my face, smelling and tasting of salt and metal and something more… I looked up to see my beloved Valtin speared high into the branch of a tree, his eyes gouged out, a cluster of flies buzzing inside his gaping mouth. His body had been ripped open, bathing me in the malodorous soup of his guts. I opened my mouth to scream, only to taste more of the bitter broth.

Then I felt her awkward footsteps pitter-pattering into the base of my skull. I turned around to find her, the author of all my sufferings peeling through the veil of fog. In her hand was what I presumed to be Valtin's still beating heart. The minute crimson channels of his blood created intricate patterns with the network of purple veins on her hand. Bravely, I turned to get Valtin's axe that I spotted leaning against the tree trunk. She took a step towards me. I staggered from the weight of it but through some mysterious reserve of strength, I lifted the axe and let it fall into her skull with a sickening wet thump. It created a yawning scarlet gash of flesh and bone. The wound seemed to smile at me and soon, it closed, gobbling its own blood. She took another step. And my screams wafted behind me like a bridal curtain as I ran towards the castle and into safety.

Soldiers, servants and serfs hunted that night. And the days and the nights after, but none of them found the monster nor the defiled corpse of my Valtin. I was too shaken and bereaved to care about the hushed murmurs–gossip that soon spread like wildfire across the land. My mind teetered on insanity. And one by one, the servants left me.

I would spend my days wandering inside the castle and my nights screaming my soul out of my body until soon, even the mice and the spiders tired of my miserable company. It was during one of those aimless wanderings that I stumbled upon a room that I have never seen before. The chamber looked no less than a temple fit for some pagan goddess. At first I had to shield my eyes, nearly blinded by its sheer resplendence. Everything had been fashioned from solid gold; dwarfish jewels winked at me obscenely here and there.

It was hard to contain the startled gasp that leapt from my throat. Affixed into a luxurious fur-lined wall was the portrait of a lady. A lady that bore a face the same as mine. I didn't believe it at first, accusing my weary eyes of playing terrible tricks on me. But as I peered closer, I saw that there

was no mistaking the familiar faultless contours as smooth and white as snow, the carmine lips as bright as blood, and the ebony eyebrows that arched in perfect twin bows. Could it be, I wondered, that my lord husband had commissioned this portrait for me? And could it be that these personal belongings–ribbons and jeweled combs–laid carefully on an ivory table, be a part of the past that I somehow failed to remember?

Among the objects was a laced handkerchief with an A daintily embroidered on one corner, roses and thorns twisting around the letter. Amalie?, I wondered. But even as I tried to convince myself, I knew that the girl in the painting couldn't have been me. I felt no special bond with the room nor with the possessions; no memories came flooding back to me. In there, I felt like an intruder, sticking my nose into someone else's story.

That was when I saw the apple– red, round, redolent and perpetually fresh. Until then, I saw it only in books, the picture swelling provocatively from the crinkled pages. I knew it to be the fabled fruit that grew from the enchanted forest, on a tree that served as a dwarfish dwelling. I saw the small concave portion–evidence that someone had taken a bite from it. The thought baffled me. No human –king, soldier or slave– dared to pluck a fruit from the tree for no one knew what its magic would bring them. For some, it could be death. For others, some say, a kind of cursed eternal life. Right then, I knew what I had to do. I took my warmest cloak and headed towards the enchanted forest.

It had been a troublesome journey. The cruel wind bit through my skin and the trees and stones kept changing their shapes around me. Even so, I followed the silver trail that always led straight no matter how the rest of the mystic forest twisted and yawed ways. Suddenly, I found myself standing before the dwarfish tree. It was massive and time-eaten, its senile roots grappling beneath the earth. Its ponderous branches drooped downwards as if barely able to bear the immortal beauty of its fruits. Then, one by one, the dwarfs came out, all seven of them. From the soil, they sprouted themselves into being.

They were brown like earth and wood, with knotted limbs and smoky beards that dripped from their sharp chins, clothing their nakedness. Gems of incomparable beauty sat on their bald heads, crowning their hideousness. One of them stroked the hem of my skirt and sniffed it with his beak-like nose. It took all of my power not to wince and lurch away. Had his fingers

touched my skin, no doubt I would've withered. Keeping a firm front, I voiced my request. But it seemed that the old enchanted beings knew what I came for even before I left.

Animatedly, dividing the chapters amongst themselves, and occasionally fighting over who got to tell the best parts, they told me what I needed to know. They recounted to me the story of how a lord's young daughter by the name of Agnise once stole a fruit from the tree. And how she dropped into the earth, cursed to a permanent slumber. The lord, who loved her so much, had a glass coffin fashioned to contain her corpse and he would sit by her side day and night, unable to part with her and her beauty. Eventually, for a hefty sum of gold, the dwarfs relented to the lord's pleadings and agreed to perform for him a secret art known only by those such as themselves. And so the lord found himself a black-haired girl from some distant peasant village. She was sold to him by her starving parents for a fistful of gold coins. And the dwarfs, with their magical hands, peeled off the peasant girl's face, did the same to the sleeping Agnise, then carefully stitched the highborn lady's face into the peasant girl's head. They said too that they didn't bother placing the peasant's face on the lord's daughter… that it was too ugly and it would be shameful to do so.

The way they had said it, it was as if they had gouged Agnise's eyes with a spoon then slipped the orbs into the hollow sockets where my own eyes had been. Perhaps that's exactly what they had done. I didn't care anymore. All I knew was that my face, the only thing that I thought was truly mine had been nothing more than another one of the lord's elaborate lies. A ball of hurt and hatred and sorrow molded itself in the pit of my stomach and it rose to my chest, then to my throat to escape through my mouth as a scream.

I ran all the way back to the castle with the fantastic whorls of the forest reaching out to grab me. Once or twice, I strayed from the silver path and the branches of trees clawed at my skin and seized my hair. Snakelike vines crawled to strangle me and from their places in the shadows, I felt the eyes of all the forest's mystical beings pursue me. Still, I was able to reach the castle and the tower where I had banished the cursed looking glass.

For the last time, I stared at my reflection. But where before the sight of it filled me with pride and pleasure, it came to repulse me. And before I got lost again in the universe of my –no, not mine– *Agnise's* face, I grabbed the chair and hurled it towards the mirror. The mirror seemed to scream at

me just before I broke it, then I heard it explode into a thousand little voices. Their screams seemed to magnify and swell out towards the worlds beyond. I watched my reflection shatter into infinitesimal fleeing fragments, not minding that I bathed myself in a shower of sharp splinters and disturbed dust.

Then, as I lay on the floor, as broken as my reflection, I heard the sad rustling of silk against the floor and the awkward pattering of her footsteps as she walked towards me. I smelled her too–part rot, part hope. A hope for a new life, I guessed. I myself felt like I never truly existed. I felt as if a wise man had captured and concentrated the true spirit of barrenness, kept it inside a bottle and forced me to take a swig saying, “Here, m’lady, is the taste of your wretched life.”

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in a silvery shard of glass and a thought flickered in my head. I laughed... a long, hollow laugh causing the crystal smithereens around me to rattle. I reached for that piece of mirror and dug and dragged the pointed edge across the margins of my face, taking care not to harm the perfection of her forehead, her cheeks, her nose and her chin. Then with my bare fingers, I plucked the eyes from my flayed face and handed them to her like an offering. I felt her take them from me… felt the burning coldness of her touch brush against my flesh.

In my mind, her prince found her. And so ensorcelled was he by her great beauty that he wished to take her with him to his kingdom. But this time, he would ask her first. Yes, that would be nice… And she would answer according to her heart’s desire. Finally, they would live happily ever after. After all, that’s how it’s always supposed to be. Except for me.

THE APPLE OF HER EYE

Crystal Leflar

"Mummy, may I have an apple?" Marjory asked when she came in from playing.
"Your brother is just home from school, go ask him for an apple and if he doesn't answer you, box him on the ear."

"Yes, mother." The young girl skipped down the hall to the kitchen where her brother sat staring at the apple cupped in his hand. "Daniel, may I please have that apple?" When he did not answer her, Marjory asked again. "Please brother, if you aren't going to eat it give it to me." When he still did not respond she hit him as her mother instructed. Her eyes grew wide as his head fell back and his open neck gaped at her. Her mother, who had been waiting at the door, entered when Marjory screamed.

"Whatever is the matter child?" She came to her daughter's side.

"Oh mummy, I didn't mean to hurt him! I didn't mean it!" She turned to bury her face in her mother's skirts.

"Oh child! How could you?" The mother covered her mouth with her hand.

"I didn't mean to." The girl cried and stooped down to pick up her brother's head and placed it back onto his shoulders. "There. It's okay." She stroked her brother's hair. "It's all better now, I've fixed it. She kissed the red line on his neck, and his blood stained her lips. "There now, all better, please be better." She hesitated before moving her hands and cried anew when her brother's head rolled back and landed heavily on the floor.

The mother hid a twinge of pity for her daughter's pain but shrugged it aside and spoke, perhaps more harshly than she intended. "Now stop that girl, it's of no use. You've killed your brother you evil, evil girl."

"No!" She collapsed onto the floor and cradled her brother's head on her lap, crying over it and petting his soft hair.

Her mother reached down and pulled the boy's head from her and set it on the table. "There now, get up, your father will be home soon and what do you think he will say when he sees what you've done?" She

pulled her daughter up by her arm and held her by the table. The girl, confronted by the dead gaze of her brother, closed her eyes. "Look,"Her mother shook her. "Look at what you've done."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Mummy!" She covered her face with her hands. Her mother put her arm around her and knelt to hug her tightly. "Shush, Marjory, Everything will be all right. You just leave it to Mummy and don't say a word about this to your Papa."

"But...but..." she sniffled and yelped when her mother squeezed her arm.

"Not. A. Word." Marjory's eyes watered again, this time with pain. Her mother loosened her grip and smoothed her daughter's hair and kissed her head. "I couldn't bare to lose you too, my child. Your dear brother was your father's from his dead wife; I cannot imagine the rage he would go into if he were to learn that you killed his son! Promise me, my sweet, promise that you will not say a word to he who loves you less."

Marjory nodded her head, "I promise." She choked.

"Good girl." Her mother stood and patted her head. "Now, fill the stew pot, it's time to prepare dinner."

"Y-yes Mummy." She hurried to her chore.

"Hurry child, your father will be home very soon." Marjory cleaned the last of the blood from the floor, then gathered her brother's bones, wrapped them in her apron and quietly snuck outside while her mother scrubbed the cutting table. Working quickly with her small hands, Marjory made a shallow hole beneath an old tree and carefully laid out the bones. She shifted the dirt back until the white bones were no longer visible.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to kill you." She whispered, and her tears dampened the ground. "When our puppy died we gave it a funeral, so you should have one too." She knelt and cupped her hands in front of her face and with closed eyes began to pray. "Here lies Daniel, he was my brother and now all that's left of him is bones. I was bad to hit him and I hurt him. I'm sorry. Please let my Papa not be mad at me and please make my Mummy not make me eat him." She paused to wipe her nose. "And please God, take care of my brother up in heaven and forgive me for lying to my Papa, amen."

"Marjory!" The girl jumped up when she heard her mother call. "Marjory, what are you doing out here, child?"

She turned to her mother's stern gaze. "I buried him so God could take him home."

"Oh. Well, that was very good of you." She smoothed Marjory's hair.

"It was?" Marjory sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"Yes, now it's back to the kitchen to clean up, your father will be home any minute." She pushed her daughter gently to towards the house.

"Yes, Mummy." Marjory looked back. "Mummy?"

"I'll be there in a moment, darling, go on now."

"Yes, Mummy."

As Marjory walked away, she knelt down to inspect the freshly turned earth for bits of bone that her daughter might have missed to be sure that she buried him deep enough. Once satisfied, she dusted the dirt from her skirt and returned to the house.

"Good. There now child, wash your brother's blood from your hands, dry those tears and then meet your father in the dining room, I'll be out in a moment. Her mother dried her hands and looked around at the spotless kitchen once more, her sharp eyes looking for anything that might be out of place.

"Something smells good!" Her father called as he entered the dining room.

"Welcome home, Papa." Marjory sniffled.

He frowned when he saw his daughter with her chin on her chest and her red eyes cast down. "Why Marjory, you look as though you're in trouble." He bent down and kissed the top of her head.

"She is just upset that Daniel has left us for a while." Her mother entered, carrying bowls of a hearty stew. "And she was no help in preparing dinner."

He frowned but took his seat at the table. "My son has left?"

"Oh yes, he begged me to let him go to his uncle's for a few weeks. Not to worry though dear, he will be well cared for." She set a bowl down in front of him.

"Well, I wish he would have waited to tell me goodbye-mmmm, but this stew is delicious." He took another bite. "Don't cry." He smiled kindly

at Marjory. "He won't be away forever, you know, just a few weeks." He frowned when she cried harder.

"Stop that." Her mother brought a hand down on the table, Marjory jumped in her seat at the sudden noise. "Crying will solve nothing, child." She picked up a spoon and took a large bite as her daughter watched through wide eyes. "It is time to eat now."

Marjory shook her head, "No, no, I can't. I-I'm not hungry." She cringed beneath her mother's glare.

"You will eat."

"No, I can't." Marjory pushed her bowl away and folded her arms across her chest and began to rock in her chair.

"You need to eat, Marjory." Her father smiled. "It's very good, I'm sure you'll like it." Marjory just shook her head.

"Are you sure? I am so hungry that I may not leave any for you to have later." He winked at her.

She could only nod and cry.

Her mother sighed, "Well if you aren't going to eat, take your bowl to the kitchen then go to your room. I'll come to tuck you in soon."

"Yes, mummy." Marjory jumped up and grabbed her bowl, spilling some of the stew onto her hands before dumping it back in the large pot.

"Mummy?" Marjory sat up when she heard the door open.

"Yes, darling. Lie down, it's time to sleep now." She pulled the covers back up as Marjory laid back.

"Mummy, where did he go?"

"Must we, Marjory?" she sighed and sat on the side of the bed. "He's in heaven now, looking down on you and he will always be with you and watching after you."

"Really?" came the small voice from beneath the covers.

She laughed, "Of course not, child. We ate his body for dinner and you hid his bones under that old apple tree." She stood and kissed the top of her daughter's head. "You know he's gone and crying about it won't bring him back. Try to put it from your mind, goodnight my darling." She closed the door on her daughter's crying and went to take her husband to their bed.

Marjory woke that night to her mother's murmurs and opened her

eyes to find her mother sitting next to her on the bed, stroking her hair as she did when she wasn't feeling well, "Mummy?"

"He would have found out sooner or later." She continued as though she had heard Marjory. "I told him Daniel would be away for a few weeks but what would happen when those weeks were up? What then, when Daniel didn't come home? Why, he would have rode out to my brother's house and found that it was naught but a lie. Then... then... Oh, I couldn't bear to think of the wrath he would bring upon us." She shuddered. "I couldn't stand that boy anyway. He looked so much like his mother. She had to go, of course, he should have married me as he intended to before she came along. I didn't do anything wrong by putting her out of her misery the way I did. Though, I suppose I should have killed her before she had the child." She laughed and shook her head. "I wouldn't have had to kill him later, then there would have been no need to kill my husband for fear of him finding out."

"Mummy?" Marjory whispered and peeked up over the blanket.

She looked down at her daughter. "Oh, you poor thing." She stroked her cheek. "I am so sorry I let you think you killed your brother, but it was necessary." Marjory nodded and her mother smiled. "I knew you would understand. You're such an angel, the apple of my eye, you know. Your brother was the center of your father's world, of course, but you are the center of mine."

Marjory noticed something wet dripping on her ear and turned to see her mother's bloody hand resting in her hair. "You have to understand. There is no bond greater than that between a mother and her daughter, there is no bond stronger than blood. I would never do anything to hurt you. Everything I do and everything I have done is to protect you and secure your future. You will inherit your father's fortune." She smiled down at Marjory. "You won't have to hope and beg for whatever scraps your brother sees fit to give you, and you won't have to work as hard as I did to marry into wealth or worry of what will happen to you if you aren't able to manage a good marriage.

"What about Papa?" Marjory asked after her mother became silent.

"Hmm?" Her mother shook herself from her reverie.

"What are we going to do with...with him?"

"Well, there is a pot luck dinner at the church tomorrow night. You will help me won't you, darling?"

"Yes, mummy." Marjory closed her eyes tightly to keep from crying.

"Good girl." She hugged her daughter to her chest, "That's my good girl. I knew you would understand. I'd hate to have to kill you too."

THE PIPER'S PRICE

John Vicary

They say I am Death. That is what they have called me. But then they have called me many things, and they are usually only right about the things they don't know. That is how these things go, these muddled stories that metastasize from town to town in the backwater hamlets. Eventually you have a patchwork legend of sorts, pieced from scraps of the original and sewn back together to be a tale so fantastical you wouldn't recognize your own face in the mirror if you saw it reflected and staring right back at you.

One time is just like the next, I have found. That is the thing with these tales, these people. They all think they are different. Special. And yet I can tell you how it goes as if I am reading from a book:

It starts with a sound.

Yes, it does.

A scratch in the night might wake the the baker's wife. “Algis!” she might say. “Do you hear that?” But he is not to be roused from dreams of the Mayor's oldest daughter and does not stir.

I know this, because whether it is Pomerania or Brandenburg, Uckermark or Prignitz, they are all the same. They don't know how little they differ from each other. Would they care if they did? Most certainly. But it would still change nothing.

The next morning, Odele—let us call her Odele—would say, “Just one baguette today, thanks, Hedda,” pointing to the least charred of the bunch.

Hedda would grimace. “The fault isn't mine if the bread is overcooked! I didn't sleep a wink for fear of burglars. There was a sound at the window the whole night long, I swear it. The oaf I am married to wouldn't get out to check, so I laid in my bed half dead of fright, sure I was about to be murdered! Burnt baguettes are the least of my concern, I can tell you that.”

Odele might frown. “As it happens, I heard something, too. A scratching, you say?”

“Guten morgen, meine freunden, I couldn't help but overhear. I, too, was kept from the peace of my dreams by a rasping. Only it wasn't at my window. It was somewhere in my walls. I am afraid I may have a … well, to be perfectly frank, I am afraid I may have a rat.” Frau Bubenmeister —for

there is always a nosy old biddy by the name of Frau Bubenmeister, isn't there?— shakes her head. “I had one a few years back, and it was the very devil to get rid of once it had taken up residence in the walls.”

“A rat!” You can see Odele making a face. “What are the chances that we all have such a plague?”

Yet no sooner would she speak the words than the vermin in question would scuttle across the floor of the bakery.

“Hedda! You are infested!” Odele drops the baguette on the counter.

“It isn't true! It can't be.” Hedda twists her apron into a knot. “You are mistaken!”

Frau Bubenmeister takes this opportunity to link arms with Odele. “See here, there is no shame in it. As I have just told you, I suspect myself of having a rat. Nevertheless, it is one thing to have one in your home, quite another to have one at your baker's. We shall retire to let you deal with this in privacy. Have Algis call upon Herr Finkler. I have heard that he is quite a good exterminator. Guten morgen to you, Frau Backmann.”

“But I have always been very clean, please won't you—”

“Call Herr Finkler and all shall be restored in short order. Come along, Odele.” Frau Bubenmeister tugs at the younger woman's arm.

It is here that I shall stop the narrative and advance it to save us some time. Do you suppose our charming Odele and her self-appointed guardian Frau Bubenmeister make it to their homes? No. They are overrun with a horde of teeming rats that have swept from—who could say where? The north? Must be those French! Well, it matters not, now. There is no time to place the blame when there is a tide of rodents unlike anything that can be recalled in living memory. Ah, methinks that Herr Finkler, whomever he might be, shall be unequal to the task. Don't you? Yes, because you are smart. Certainly smarter than the upstanding citizens of Hameln.

Of course they must suffer, and I am not one to rush in and save fools from their folly. It is only after the town has been drowned in its vermin plague, every exterminator extinguished, that I consider the call. When the rats have filled every cranny, when their bites are not unknown by every good person. The rodents must be spilling out of the cupboards and crawling over the tables, they need to be a festering tide of pestilence, every avenue of escape otherwise exhausted. Then I shall come.

I come in the night, arriving on the morning breeze as their savior. No one has slept. Would you close eye and dream through such assault? How

could you, with the little beasts crawling? Have you ever seen one up close, I wonder? They are not fearsome, but they are ruthless in the gnawing. It is endless. The sound of it will drive you mad over time. I have seen it. Over the years, it has happened. The noise they make, the stench they bring, the writhing of the mass of them … it is a nightmare to behold when rats become the street, the walls, the city around you. You flinch from the bite before you are bitten. You fear the death that begins to befall your neighbors.

They do not see me at first, not through their pain-addled eyes. It has begun, the madness. They are dulled to the world around them. They do not know what what is real and what is a waking dream, since the rats have started to chew, chew, chew … it is with slow blinking they come awake, nudging each other from half-drowsing slumber. The whispers herald their awareness. It has always been thus.

"Who is … ?"

"Do you see … ?"

"... his clothes. A beggar?"

I remain a statue until one of them shows courage, or some semblance of interest enough to approach me. I do not bow to gossip in the shadows.

"You are a stranger to our town? Welcome to Hameln."

I stare, letting the wind blow the stench down the river. The end of my scarf catches in the breeze and flutters, a warning in the dawn for those with sense to see it for what it was.

"Your manner of dress … I don't recognize it. Are … are you from Westphalia? Perhaps … perhaps even Beweringen?"

I am not required to give an answer to these people. They need me; they are mistaken if they have any idea to the contrary. "You have an affliction. I am here to cure it."

It is the man's turn to stare. "Sir, you are surely not from these parts. We are a cursed village. Everything has been tried, from valerian to—"

"I have not been here. Lead me to your mayor. A deal shall be struck and you shall be free of your plague when the bargain is made."

I shall not bore you with the bargain. You would think, wouldn't you, that they would consider the price. Yet they are desperate to be free of their problem. So desperate that they will agree to anything. If I were a less scrupulous man, I might take advantage. Luckily for Hameln, I am fair. I am just.

"Wait!"

A voice calls after hands have been shaken. “I … I have taken the liberty of writing it down. The bargain.”

Oh, oh. What is this? A surprise, after all. Yes, I can see that you are impressed, and well you should be. It is not often I behold something new, not after all I have seen. And so this is a lucky tale for you.

“You can read, I presume?”

I nod and withdraw my flute from my pocket. I grow impatient to be finished with formalities.

“The Leuneburg Treaty. It states that on this day of Saints John and Paul, on June the twenty-sixth, in the year of 1284, that you … may I insert your name into the document?”

“I have no name. Yet rest assured I shall not cheat you of your task. If I do not complete it, I shall not collect the debt.”

“Still, I prefer to have this settled. I shall describe you, since you prefer not to give reference, sir. '… that the pied … piper? ... has agreed, for the sum of a bag of gold, to eliminate every last rat from our town.' There, I shall sign myself witness: Decan Lude. Please also sign your mark, sir.”

I make my mark on the line. “Meine Herren, entschuldigen zie mich, bitte. I shall attend to your problem now. I am sure you are most anxious to be rid of your rats.”

“But how will you accomplish this feat? Surely not with a mere flute?”

The questions are always the same. It is not necessary to detail the disbelief that coats them like a miasma. I find my way to the center of town, squint into the sun to determine which way is west, and pull forth the flute.

When it becomes evident that this is something beyond comprehension, the crowd draws back, wanting to remain untainted by the whiff of witchcraft. No one stops me. They all want to be clear of conscience later, no trace of magic clinging to their righteousness. Yet there is always one who hangs close, one who wants to hear more than the others.

Decan Lude is the sole witness. “What song will you play?”

The question is so singularly different, I take pause. Not 'who are you”, 'what are you doing', but to ask the name of the song is appealing. I reward his originality with an answer: “A song that will not be written for nearly six hundred years.” I flutter some notes and call the clouds forth. “Totentanz.”

“But how—”

It never matters to me where they stand, and it isn't in my nature to answer the questions. I merely lead away the scourge, whatever it may be.

Decan Lude can see that it isn't prudent to stand in my wake, not when I begin the Dance of Death in earnest. What starts as a few notes in minor on the flute becomes a cavalcade of complexity in tune. Even the sun in the heavens finds reason to take shelter as the wind whips up. Although a storm was not on the horizon this morning, it is here now, but my song can be heard through every corner of the village.

And they dance.

The rats come seeking, lacking a will of their own. I have gone to their brains, I control them now. The good folks can hear it, too, and they watch through the cracks, this spell I weave. They are afraid. I don't have to see it to know. Can you blame them? Have you seen someone wield such power with his lips, with his breath? Hm, maybe you have. But not often. And not like me. I can get into you, twining in your blood, twisting through your veins until what I want is what you want. You don't know where I end and you begin. You never knew desire until I was there, whispering to you. You don't know what you are capable of, and you like that. It is okay to let me have it. Give it to me. They knew it was like that, they could sense it. They saw that I had control, and though I was a master of rats, of all things, I was master. And they knew it and fear ruled in Hameln that day.

When I was young, I danced a merry chase or a dirge, I was so lighthearted and free. I played at whim and I led others to their destiny in the manner that I delighted. Time has worn me into a trough, and my steps are measured. I sing the Totentanz without guile or bliss, without shame or mercy, without care or delight. I lead them, their minds a fragile thread in my grasp, and I pour their life as one into the drink of the Weser River.

No one hears the screaming of the rats. The people rejoice at such death ,and why shouldn't they? But I hear the screams, I feel the connection. I do. As each one drowns under the dark water, as each light goes out, as each heart is extinguished and each connection broken, I feel the stab. Can you, I wonder?

And then there are none.

I am wearied by this, and I want my compensation. The job is done, the sun is shining and the townspeople have reason to celebrate. Order is restored. They do not know the price I have paid for their freedom. But can anyone ever say they do? I cannot have redemption so give me my money and let me begone.

The whisper is not unknown to me. Can you hear it? It begins before I am back to the town hall. If you listen, you will understand that Greed is the fastest traveler, quick on the heels of Death, whose name I bear.

“Do not pay him.”

I can hear it from where I stand, from across the square. I could hear it from across the world, this betrayal that runs through man's foundation, an irreparable crack.

“The deed is not done, there yet remains one rat. See him there? He promised every rat, and there so remains one. Do not pay him.”

The advisors are not free from pestilence for a moment, the blood still running from the bites, and they are looking for ways to cheat. Did you hold out hope that they would be better here? That somehow Hameln was made of nobler stuff? My eyes darken, my hands curl into empty fists as backs turn against me, this ragged beggar. This is recompense for a deed served: treachery.

You shall see that though I have no name, though I am not the legend, I shall seize the mantle and make the tale true. You have called down Death upon your house, and it is here to stay. I am the thief in your midst. I am the shadow of regret that shall plague you. I am your mistake, your greed. I am your punishment. I am everything you deserve, come to set the scale. I am fairness. You call me Death, and I come as a piper when you do.

The tune is for them this time. Their progeny is my price. I demand nothing less, and I take it, calling forth the tune with no name from a sky so dark it rivals night. And every child in the village comes to the terrible sound, unable to resist the siren call of my command. I hold them as gently as I held a rat, with as much compassion. One hundred and thirty souls are cradled in my grasp, captive to my will. They are but puppets to me, and as I move them through town and up to Koppelburg Hill, I glimpse the grief that is etched by this act. Theirs is an agony so great the tears are stopped in their hearts. There will be time for that later. There will be silence enough to hear the crying throughout the ages here. Mine is vengeance. Mine is justice.

They say I am Death. All I can tell you is this: it starts with a sound. Yes, it does. Can you hear it?

ZOMBERELLA

James Pratt

The old woman was dead, no question about that. The small crater in her forehead showed where the fireplace poker had found its mark. Cadence looked from the poker to her stepmother and back. Realizing she was still holding the murder weapon, she dropped the poker which landed on the hearth with a dull clunk.

"Oh my God," Cadence said.

"You did the right thing," Margrave, the old man only she could see, assured her.

"She was the closest thing to a mother I ever had."

"She was a cruel, sadistic bitch and she had it coming."

"After father died, she…she…"

"Treated you like a slave."

"Well, yes," Cadence conceded. "But still…"

"She hated your father and when he died, she transferred that hatred to you. In time she would have killed you." Margrave thought for a moment. "Would it help if I told you your stepmother murdered your father?"

Cadence's eyes widened. "Did she?"

"Well…I certainly wouldn't have put it past her."

Cadence sank to the floor. "I…I'm going to hang for this."

"Her mistreatment of you is well known. You can claim self-defense."

"Stepmother's sister is married to the magistrate. I'm as good as dead." She reached toward the corpse but stayed her hand. Cadence's stepmother hadn't found peace in death. Her pinched face was no less intimidating now than it had been in life. Cadence began to sob.

"Now, now," Margrave said, "none of that. We'll think of something."

Cadence shook her head. "I'm doomed. And maybe that's for the best."

Margrave's arched eyebrows narrowed. "What do you mean?"

Cadence reached into the folds of her apron and produced a small, keen-bladed knife she used to peel vegetables and skin chickens. "My life is hell and there's only one solution. I think it's time I–"

"Good grief, girl. Put that knife away and stand up."

“Just leave me–“

“I said stand up,” Margrave commanded.

Cadence looked up at him. “Margrave?”

He offered her his hand. With no more substance than a puff of smoke, it was merely a gesture but it was all he had to offer. “There’s something you need to see.”

Cadence rose and followed him to the fireplace where Margrave pointed to a sooty brick.

“Push that,” he said.

Cadence pushed the brick Margrave had indicated. With the grinding of ancient gears, the fireplace slowly slid backward to reveal a hidden recess.

“How did you know about this place?” Cadence asked.

“In life I was a diabolist,” Margrave explained. “When I felt the end approach, I feared for my immortal soul. That’s the price of dealing with the powers of darkness, you know. I had heard of your great grandfather’s prodigious skills in the forbidden arts and so I sought his counsel. He saved me from the tender mercies of the Pit by binding me to this house. Here I shall remain for 665 years, after which time ownership of my soul reverts back to me. In exchange for his aid, I pledged to watch over his bloodline and lend my services to any that showed promise in the Art. I even tutored your father until his untimely death.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?”

“I had to wait until you were ready.” Margrave looked at the corpse. “Or until your need was great enough.”

“My stepsisters used to tease me about father being a sorcerer,” Cadence said thoughtfully. “I guess they were right all along.”

Margrave nodded. “He was a necromancer, to be exact.”

“So all this means…you’re a ghost?”

“Not in the way you mean but that’s as good a name as any. What did you think I was?”

“You’ve been with me so long I never really thought about it. I suppose I simply took you for a figment of my imagination, a friend I created out of loneliness.”

Margrave grunted, which was the closest he ever came to a laugh. “If I was a figment of your imagination, how could I have taught you to read and write?”

Cadence shrugged. “Like I said, I never really gave it much thought.”

“Growing up believing a figment of your imagination was your only friend. That’s quite a depressing prospect.”

“That’s nothing. There was an odd girl the next town over who used to dress mice in little hats and coats. She died of the plague.”

“Well, that was probably for the best. Light a candle and follow me.”

Behind the fireplace was a high, narrow room whose walls were covered with shelves and shelves of cobweb-laden books. A writing desk sat at the far end of the room, its worn surface covered in reams of parchment. Beside the desk was a marble pedestal on which lay a large folio bound in black leather cracked with age. The folio sat in a glass case which was cold to the touch

“Your great grandfather’s secret library,” Margrave explained. He pointed to a book bound in red velvet which sat on a nearby shelf. “Retrieve that, please.”

Cadence tried to do as asked but the book stuck partway. Shrugging, she glanced at Margrave, who simply smiled as a portion of the floor sunk into the earth, revealing a set of stone steps leading down into darkness.

“After you, m'lady,” Margrave said.

The stone steps led to a much larger, mustier chamber filled with heavy wooden tables, each of which held a wide variety of items. The tables were arranged in a semicircle around a chalk pentacle inscribed in the center of the floor with ominous symbols etched at each of its five points.

Skirting the pentacle, Cadence inspected the tables one by one. One table bore measuring and shaping tools including, but not limited to: calipers, scales, protractors, measuring rods, spherometers, gouges, lathes, jigs, and hammers. Another held disturbing chimeric skeletons held together by stiff wire. There was a table covered in sheets of parchment upon which someone had written cryptic formulas, perspective-skewing geometric configurations, and what appeared to be astronomical star charts. The largest table was crowded with beakers filled with thick, syrupy liquids, some of which gave off a faint glow, and jars containing the fetal bodies of tiny, unidentifiable creatures suspended in amber goo.

“Your great grandfather was a man of many interests.” Margrave gave her an appraising look. “I have to say, you’re taking all this rather well.”

“I’ve been as a slave for as long as I can remember. Seeing all this makes me wonder if I can finally be free. I think I’d sell my soul to the

devil himself for that."

"Hush, girl! You mustn't say such things, especially in this of all places."

Cadence gave him a sideways glance. "It's just an expression."

"Consider this your first lesson," Margrave continued. "Never joke where the Pit is concerned and above all never extend an invitation or propose a bargain. You never know who or what might be listening. Now go back upstairs and fetch your stepmother. We'll have her back on her feet in no time."

Cadence nodded and turned to go but paused at the foot of the steps. "What about my stepsisters? They'll be home within the hour."

"Then we'd better hurry. Run along now."

When Cadence returned, Margrave instructed her to place her stepmother within the pentacle then retrieve the black book from the glass case beside her great grandfather's desk.

"In your hands you hold the Book of Bones," Margrave informed her after Cadence had returned with the book. "It was your great grandfather's most prized possession. He said it was given to him by a traveler who claimed it came from another world. Your great grandfather believed him for it describes in great detail the strange history of a kingdom found on no map. It is also a book of dire prophecies, though I assume they also pertain to a world other than our own. Most importantly it is an unrivaled record of necromantic lore. Now, please turn to page five-hundred and thirteen."

Under Margrave's direction, Cadence recited the proper formulas while etching certain symbols into her stepmother's liver-spotted flesh.

"Your stepmother's wretched soul is gone," Margrave explained. "But something lingers in the bodies of the newly dead. Call it an echo for lack of a better word. Those signs of power you're applying to her body are like a labyrinth. Whatever spiritual residue remains will be trapped within them, unable to find egress and thus bound to her flesh."

The final ingredient was a few drops of Cadence's own blood which were applied to the corpse's parched lips. After a few moments her stepmother began to stir, then commenced to lick greedily at the blood.

"Cadence," Margrave said, but his pupil simply stared at their handiwork. "Cadence!"

Cadence jumped. "WHAT?"

"She's bound to your will now. Tell her to rise."

“Stand up,” Cadence commanded.

The old woman clambered to her feet. Slack-jawed and expressionless, she stood staring straight ahead. Cadence reached out and pushed her stepmother’s mouth shut with an audible click.

“Careful,” Margrave cautioned. “The risen dead are known to have ghastly appetites.”

“Have we really raised her from the dead?”

“Well, that’s a matter of debate. The important thing is she’s up and moving. In the meantime, you’ll need something to hide the wound.”

“I’ll fetch her Sunday bonnet, but then I need to start on supper. Harmony and Melody will be expecting food on the table when they come home.”

“You could get her to help you,” Margrave said.

“Who?”

Margrave nodded toward the old woman. “Her.”

Cadence flashed a skeptical grin. “She’s never cooked a thing in her life.”

“Maybe it’s time for her to learn.”

“Is something wrong, mother?” Melody asked. “You haven’t said a word since we came home.”

“You do look a bit pale,” Harmony observed. “And you haven’t touched your meal.”

Their mother sat in her usual place at the head of the table, back rigid and eyes staring straight ahead, under the expectant gazes of her daughters. No one was allowed to touch their meal before the matriarch of the household had taken her first bite.

Melody’s eyes narrowed a bit. “Why are you wearing your Sunday bonnet at the table?”

“She said she didn’t feel well,” Cadence explained, standing in her usual place beside her stepmother’s chair. “I suggested she wear her bonnet to keep her head warm.”

“Is that true, mother?” Harmony asked. “Are you a bit under the weather?”

“Did you leave mother’s window open last night?” Melody asked, glaring at Cadence. “The cold night air probably gave her a case of the vapors.”

“Try some soup,” Cadence suggested, placing a hand on her stepmother’s shoulder. “It’s good for a summer cold.”

“Don’t tell her what to do!” Melody snapped. “She’ll eat–”

“Oh, leave Cadence alone,” Harmony said. “I’m starving. Mother, please try…”

Harmony’s voice trailed off as her mother bent over and began to loudly slurp from her bowl.

Melody’s eyes widened. “Muh…mother?”

“You…you might want to use a spoon,” Cadence said, and her stepmother obliged.

“What’s going on here?” Melody demanded. “Did you do something to her?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Harmony said. “Cadence would never do anything to–“

“Quiet,” Melody ordered, still looking at her stepsister. “Cadence, kindly remove mother’s bonnet.”

Cadence shook her head. “I don’t think–“

”I know you don’t think. Now take off her bonnet.”

Cadence sighed and did as she was told. The sisters’ eyes widened at the sight of the dent in their mother’s forehead.

“Mother!” Melody cried.

Cadence took a step backward. “She…she was going to–“

“Shut up!” Melody waved her hand back and forth in front of her mother’s vacant face. “What did you do to her?”

“I…I tried to make it right,” Cadence insisted.

“You…” Melody put her hand to her mouth. “Black magic!”

Harmony’s gaze darted between Melody and Cadence. “What?”

“The rumors about your family were true!” Melody declared. “You’ll burn at the stake for this!”

“I didn’t mean to do it!” Cadence cried. “I…I just wanted to scare her.”

“You…you…” Melody’s expression became a ghastly smile. “Turnabout’s fair play, I suppose.”

Harmony winced. “Melody, no.”

“Your father got off lucky,” Melody continued. “They should have burned him at the stake too. Mother did him a favor.”

Harmony smacked the table. “Melody, stop!”

“He didn’t suffer much,” Melody went on. “Certainly less than he would have if he’d received proper justice.”

Cadence swallowed. “Are. . .are you saying your mother killed my father?”

Melody laughed. “Of course that’s what I’m saying. Mother only married him because he claimed to be a man of means and capable of providing for her daughters. But that was a lie. All that remained of his family’s estate was this crumbling house, a few coppers, and a simpleton child. He was a scoundrel as well as-“

“Kill her,” Cadence commanded.

Melody’s grin wilted as her mother rose and began walking towards her. “Mother?”

Harmony turned to Cadence. “Stop this.”

“Too late,” Cadence replied.

“Mother?” Melody repeated, backing away as her mother continued to advance.

“Please,” Harmony begged, rising from her chair.

Melody tripped, fell backward, and lay stunned. She opened her eyes to find her mother crouched over her, yellow teeth bared. Melody’s screams abruptly cut off as her mother bit into her throat.

“No!” Harmony ran at Cadence and pinned her against the wall. “Stop this
now!”

“Too late,” Cadence repeated.

Stepping back, Harmony looked down at the red stain spreading across her dress.

“You were the only one who was ever decent to me,” Cadence said as Harmony slumped to the floor. In her hand was the small knife she always carried with her, its blade wet with blood. “And I’m truly sorry.”

Margrave appeared in the doorway. “I see things went well,” he said, surveying the room.

“This is the end of me,” Cadence said, trying to ignore the sound of her stepmother chewing on Melody.

“I beg to differ,” Margrave said. “In fact, I’d say it was the beginning. Remember what you said about being free?”

Sniffling, Cadence nodded.

“Then consider this step one. So long as they were a part of your life, your life wouldn’t have been your own.”

Cadence thought for a moment then nodded. “Well, when you put it that way.”

“Now hurry and bring your sisters downstairs. Start with Melody.”

“Why her?”

“The bite of the risen dead can have certain unpredictable side-effects. It’s best that we raise your sister and bind her to your will before she rises on her own.”

Cadence took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and exhaled. “Okay.”

Weeks passed. Cadence attributed her stepmother and stepsisters’ house-ridden status to a strange illness and, because the trio had been barely cordial with the neighbors even at the best of times, her explanation was accepted with a nod and a shrug. Her stepmother had likewise been

estranged from all her relatives, including her sister the magistrate's wife; none had come to call before nor came to call after. Cadence set her stepfamily to housekeeping duty while she dedicated herself to study of The Art under Margrave's tutelage.

"You're making excellent progress," Margrave said one day. "Your father would have been very proud of you."

"Now that there are three to help with the cooking and housework, I have plenty of time to study. I can't help but feeling a bit guilty about Harmony though. She wasn't all bad."

"Don't be," Margrave told her. "Her fate was linked with that of her mother's. There was no happy ending waiting for her."

Cadence sighed. "I suppose not. So what's the lesson for today?"

"Today we'll be concentrating on rune magic. On page 1,865 of the Book of Bones you will see the Sign of Koth. There's an interesting story behind that rune. Did I ever tell you about the King in Yellow?"

THE GIRL IN THE GLASS COFFIN

Carl Thomas Fox

"It has been confirmed," stated Annabelle Ortega on the news, "rising teen actress, Eira Album, has been poisoned."

The TV image changed from the dark beauty that was Annabelle Ortega, and became a nightmarish scene of an emergency response team rushing a girl out of a high building and into an ambulance. Spectators and paparazzi were bustling, trying to see, the flashes of their cameras buzzing like lightning, blotting out images for micro seconds. Then, the camera moved in, showing a pale girl, her hair darker than the night, strapped to a stretcher, a mask over her face, with the paramedics trying to keep her going.

"As of yet," Annabelle continued, now a voice over during these images, "it is unclear as to what has happened or why this beautiful young actress has been poisoned. It is rumoured this has been an attack by the stalker known as Wicked. For the past year, Ms. Album has been targeted by Wicked, threatening letters, break ins at her apartment and a damaging photo that destroyed her affiliation with a children's channel. However, as of yet, this is all unconfirmed. All we know is that Ms. Album is being rushed to the hospital. Her condition is unclear."

A woman sat in a dark room, watching the news report. In the lone dark room, there were pictures of Eira plastered on the wall. Promotional photos for the three Disney movies she starred in, the teen supernatural drama she was a major star in, known as *Fivefold*, and various other modelling pictures, from when she was twelve years old. She had done so much in the space of five years.

Turning away from the television, she looked at the glaring image of her computer, logged into the internet where a search engine immediately popped up. Into the search engine, she typed in "*list of popular and beautiful actresses*". A list of websites popped up, the woman clicking on a site, where a list of the top ten popular and beautiful actresses was presented in vibrant black and white. At the moment, Eira was still considered number one. With the poison eating its way through her, soon she would fade. Soon, Steph Album would return to the list.

Turning away from the computer, the woman looked towards a mirror, laden with more photos of Eira, as well as perfume and cosmetics the young actress had endorsed and a pair of her own bra and knickers, filled with several pin needles. Needles had also been placed in a doll of Eira that was made for young girls.

The woman looking back from the mirror was young, a few years older than Eira, with similar dark hair, but with a darker complexion. Although in her late thirties, the woman looked much younger, her body having to endure so many surgeries. Breast implants, making them larger and fuller, all residual fat removed, facial operations to give her a sleeker look, implants in her legs and buttocks, to give her that more shapely figure. In addition, she'd had a genital operation, making her tight enough as if she were a permanent virgin.

This was Steph Album, otherwise know as Wicked. She looked at herself in the mirror, preparing herself to be the grieving stepmother. This was the perfect test for her acting skills. Eira was an insignificant hurdle, a problem that did not matter, yet stood in her way. Nonetheless, for her own means, she had to look the part. She clothed herself all in black and forced herself to cry. Not too much. It had to look real.

Satisfied that she had the right look, she left the small, dark, grimy apartment she rented for the identity of Wicked and went to do the "motherly" thing.

From the moment Steph first married Eira's father, the famous photographer, Jack Album, she knew she had competition from Eira. Immediately, she did not like the girl.

At the time, Eira was five years old, her mother who was a famous actress named Iona Jones, was a victim of an obsessive fan. Even at just five years of age, Eira was already big in the modelling world. She had an ethereal quality about her. That pale skin with the pitch black hair, blood red lips that needed no enhancement, and those deep sea blue eyes. When looking at her, she always looked lost in thought, but had that quirky smile that let everyone in.

Even at five, she was considered a beauty.

Then, she was offered an acting contract.

Eira's father had many contacts within television, and one of these friends thought that Eira was perfect for a presenting job on a children's television programme. Until the age of ten, she was part of this programme,

helping to educate children all over the country. Eira could act, she could sing, she could dance. All of this seemed like natural talent, talent that Steph had to study hard to learn, working for hours in a restaurant to pay her bills.

For this reason, Steph hated her stepdaughter.

Eira's beauty also enhanced as the years progressed. Although a child, her beauty was world renowned. Steph feared this. She knew the moment Eira reached puberty, when her beauty became more sexualised, she would become more popular. She needed to change this. She endured hours of surgery, of dieting, of work outs. All to just get the perfect body, sculpted to be the way that all men fantasise about. Even her husband, she needed the perfect body to keep him enticed and infatuated with her.

Her beauty and her father, something else she hated Eira for.

Jack Album acted as his daughter's agent, getting her all the jobs. With his help, she was given acting jobs, in and out of the children's programme. She was given the starring role of a teenage series called *Fivefold* when she turned sweet sixteen just last year. At the same time, she was also given a movie, playing the daughter of the hero in the sword and sorcery epic *The Otherworld*. These latter jobs were brought in by the deals her father made all those years ago, but he never got any jobs for Steph.

Angered by her husband's lack of involvement in her career, focusing only on his brat of a daughter, Steph knew she had to get rid of him. So, she slipped a pair of adders into his sleeping bag when he went fishing with some friends. He died instantly, a tragic accident as all believed. Steph played the grieving widow so perfectly. She swore to look after her stepdaughter, already planning to sabotage her career, but nothing could sabotage it. The years got better for Eira's career, to the point where she was protected by another agent.

As time moved on, Steph needed to find a way to stop Eira. She couldn't just kill her, not after what happened to her father, and after she swore to protect Eira. No, she could fuck with Eira's mind.

Remembering how Eira's mother was run down by an obsessive fan, Steph created a stalker for Eira, to scare her. She called herself Wicked, sending random notes and emails, trying to scare the girl. As they shared the same mansion together, alone, she was able to make it look like Wicked snuck in, planting freaky dolls and pictures of her, taken from afar.

But Eira was so resilient. She showed no fear, she kept a brave face, not caring about the threats. She just got on with the job.

When she was fourteen years old, Eira surrounded herself with her group of friends, four boys and three girls. Her little entourage. They went wherever she went, looking out for her at school when she went to parties, when she was on set, given permission to do so. One of them even appeared as a bodyguard to her, a tall, burly boy, named Samuel Gumpy, who was very protective of Eira and the rest of the entourage. This made it difficult for Steph to do much.

However, the presence of the entourage gave Steph an edge. Knowing that Eira was going to a friend's fifteenth birthday party, she hired a snitch to follow Eira. When the snitch returned, he presented Steph with the perfect smoking gun. Pictures of Eira drinking, doing drugs and having orgies with her entourage of seven.

Once more under the guise of Wicked, Steph approached Eira with the photos online, saying if she didn't stop her career, the pictures would be put onto social networks for all to see. Once more showing her resilience, Eira did not back down, and called Wicked's bluff. Of course, the pictures were broadcast. Indeed, Eira's career with the children's channel was long gone. No matter, her career was booming with the teenage dramas and the upcoming movies. She now had a reputation as a wild child, so much so that it only boosted her popularity. Not to mention, now in the body of a fruitful, blossoming teenager, she also made her way up the sexiest woman poll.

Steph knew she had to escalate the situation.

Knowing the right people who experimented with various narcotics, trying to find the perfect one that could never be traced, she had them develop a poison. A poison with the same properties of being undetected. The only problem was how to administer it. The answer came to her simply enough. Another party, at a friend's high rise penthouse, celebrating the acceptance of her major film role.

It worked. It was time to celebrate her success. Quickly catching a cab, Steph rushed to the hospital, which was swarming with press, paparazzi and mourning fans. This was the perfect opportunity to get some shots with the paparazzi. Of course, knowing she was the stepmother, she was let right in. Here, the doctors met her, leading her to Eira,

Eira was being kept in a sterile room, no one allowed to enter. She was hooked up to several different machines. All of which were trying to keep her alive. The doctors explained that, at this point, there was no way to save her. Whatever the poison was, they could find no trace of it to develop a counter serum. All they could do was pump her with several antibiotics, hoping that just one might fight the poison.

Being the perfect actress, Steph made it look like she was breaking down, looking at the helpless girl. Inside she was smiling. She had won.

***

The next day, Steph was in the mansion, enjoying the fact that there was no sign of Eira.

Steph was upstairs in her bedroom, lying face down on the bed. She was doing more acting, faking her pleasure as the boy on top of her rode her. This boy, Samuel Hutner, a friend of Eira's who was at the party, was how the poison was administered. Steph had seduced him, promising him he could do whatever he wanted to her, as long as he gave her the poison, in a shot. In addition, he also had to destroy the apartment Steph used that night.

Growing bored of the boy's vain attempt at fucking her, Steph was relieved when she felt him suddenly shuddering and jerking, with a loud grunt. He had come. As he rolled off her, falling straight off to sleep, Steph got out of bed, pulling a robe over her naked form, and walked to the other side of the large, exquisite bedroom that was all hers. There, she came across her computer, where once again she booted up the internet and typed into the search engine, "*list of popular and beautiful actresses*".

To her dismay, Eira Album was still at the top of the poll.

There was another link about Eira, a recent one. Clicking on it, Steph was directed to a site explaining that, during the night, a Dr. Charmaine had found a way to cease the poison. He had developed a special cryogenic coffin that froze all illnesses where they were. Now, they had more time to find a cure. Eira had been placed in this coffin and was still alive, with the hope of pulling through.

With building fury, Steph read on, reading that the coffin had a glass case, allowing all to look inside. The coffin was in town hall, for all to see her. A beautiful girl, peacefully sleeping, with her pale skin, her black hair

running around her head, those kissable red lips and the smooth, delicate, alluring body in the tight wrappings of a white dress. She looked like a mystical bride, two great candles either side of the coffin, her entourage of seven never leaving her side. Flowers and notes from mourning fans were placed all around the coffin, hoping for her to recover.

Eira Album was now known as the Girl in the Glass Coffin.

Fury was far from what Steph was feeling. She had been cheated again.

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That night, Steph went to town hall, once again acting as the grieving stepmother. Because of this, the entourage had no choice but to leave her alone.

Having the coffin to herself, Steph looked at it, trying to think of a way she could end this. The answer was so simple. The coffin obviously had to remain sterile. In addition, the piles of flowers at one side was making one if the candles look very precarious. It was just a matter of time before ...

With a simple nudge, the candle fell over, and the heavy stick struck the glass, making it crack. The cold air started hissing out, and on the dials Steph was able to read that the temperature and pressure was rising. It was just a matter of time before it was high enough for the poison to keep working.

Steph turned to walk away, when she found herself walking into the powerful frame of Gumpy, who held her fast. She was caught. She tried to fight him, but he was too strong.

"Hello, mother," a voice said behind Steph. A voice that was filled with venom, making Steph's blood run cold.

Gumpy forced Steph to turn around, where she found herself looking at Eira standing in front if her, swaying, disoriented, but determined. Before Steph could do anything, Eira lunged at her, kissing her full on the lips, Gumpy holding her tight as she did so.

"What the hell are you doing?" Steph snarled with equal venom.

"Just a goodbye kiss, mother," Eira grinned. "We knew what you were doing, Hutner came to us. So, we faked the whole thing, and he gave me the same poison, in my lipstick to give to you."

"You fucking bitch," Steph roared, trying to break free, but this only made Gumpy hold harder, the other men coming in, beating Steph to the floor.

As she watched, Eira began to stumble. Seeing this, one of the girl members of the entourage, a glasses-clad blonde named Docky, rushed up to her.

"Eira, you okay?" asked Docky.

"The poison is affecting me. I don't have much time."

In horror, Docky watched as blood started trickling down from Eira's mouth.

"Come on," Docky pleaded, trying to help her friend, "get in the coffin. Charmaine said it would work."

"The glass is broken, it is no longer sterile, and it will take too long for help to come. No, I will just have enough time to watch the bitch die."

Ignoring her own approaching death, Eira watched as the poison worked through Steph. The beating she was getting helped. She no longer looked like the beautiful actress, now just a deformed hag. At least this is something the two actresses will forever be famous for.

THE OLD ONE AND THE THREE PIGS

Pepper Scoville

Margaret Pigg, mother of three, was quite shocked when her uncle Silas Pickman bequeathed his prized book, The Necronomicon, to her on his deathbed. Being the typical suburban mother, she couldn't comprehend the scope of the powerful tome entrusted to her, which could be the reason she was the only one Silas trusted to have it.

The book was placed in a box and stored in the attic, completely forgotten within days of its inheritance. The three Pigg boys often played in the attic when Margaret was busy making cookies for a bake sale or fixing snacks for the boys' soccer teams. On one such day, Charles Pickman Pigg, the eldest (by two minutes), knocked open a box when he dove to catch a baseball.

Baby clothes, old photos, and toys spilled out of the box. Charlie tried to stuff the items back in but the old cardboard split at the seam and a book slid out of the bottom.

Dexter, the next oldest, reached down to pick up the book. He yanked his hand back the moment his fingers touched the cover.

"What's wrong?" asked Ward, the baby of the bunch.

"It feels wrong," said Dexter.

"What the hell does that mean?" Charlie scoffed. He liked to use swear words. It made him feel tough and grown up.

"It made my skin feel weird." Dexter curled his lip and shook his head. "I'm not getting near that thing."

Ward stayed by Dexter and stared at the book in fear. Charlie laughed. "Wusses."

Charlie's hand brushed against the cover as he knelt down to take it. He felt a shock, like in winter when he ran through the house in his socks and then touched metal. He grabbed the book and gasped. Power surged through him.

"Put it down, Charlie!" Dexter yelled.

"Charles!" Their mother called up the stairs, "What are you doing up there?"

Charlie dropped the book. "Nothing! We're just playing ball!"

"Well, don't break anything!"

Charlie caressed the book's smooth binding. He squinted as he peered closer. Small hairs were just visible. *Was that skin*?

With trembling hands, Charlie stuffed the book back into the box.

"Let's go play in the backyard," Ward pleaded. God, Charlie hated how whiny his voice got. "Come, on. Please?"

"Sure." The other two bounded down the attic steps but Charlie's gaze lingered on the broken cardboard box.

The years passed and Margaret's three boys grew to adulthood. As they left to go to Miskatonic University in Arkham, alma mater to all of the Piggs, she reminded them of the dangers of the world.

"Don't believe everything you hear. Don't go off with people you don't know. Watch out for easy girls. Don't accept drinks from strangers." Margaret ticked each off on a finger as she said it.

"I think we'll be fine." Dexter smiled at his mother and kissed her cheek.

"You don't know that. How do you think cults recruit people? You have to be careful." Margaret gave them each a hug. Ward, now a nervous environmentalist; Dexter, a man of science with a fondness for woodwork; and Charlie, a poli-sci major with an eye on the White House; each gave their mother a hug in return and promised to eat their vegetables and call once a week.

Ward settled in at an eco-friendly house made of recycled materials, intent on saving the world one glass bottle at a time. Dexter moved into a rundown clapboard house on the edge of campus. Charlie moved into a brick bungalow with the Necronomicon smuggled at the bottom of his suitcase.

For months, the brothers rarely saw each other save for the occasional run in on campus. Each had his own life and friends. Though one day, that changed.

It was late as Dexter headed across campus. He only planned to be at the library for a couple of hours but a pretty girl kept checking him out and he stayed to flirt a while. He strode across the quad with a spring in his step and her number in his cell phone.

A lone figure scurried from the shadows and startled Dexter. The man, hunched over and muttering, nearly slammed into Dexter.

"Watch where you're going!" Dexter yelled after him. The lone figure turned and flipped him the bird. Dexter's jaw dropped.

It was Charlie. Disheveled hair, stained clothes, and he smelled as if he hadn't bathed in a week but it was definitely him.

Dexter called after him but Charlie disappeared into the shadows.

*****

Steam wafted around Ward's mouth as he sipped hot tea. "It's not our problem."

"It is our problem, he's our brother!" Dexter glared across the café table at Ward and dissected the vegan muffin in front of him with small pinches.

"The moment he found that book, he changed. He became weird and secretive." Ward said.

"He was one of the most popular people at school! He was homecoming king." Dexter pointed at him with a crumb covered finger.

"He closed off. No one really got to know him. And that book…"

"Stop bringing up the book. It's not haunted or possessed or anything. I think he's having mental issues and I think we need to step in and do something."

Wade set his tea aside. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," Dexter said. "Maybe we could just sit down and talk with him. Try to get him to see that he needs help."

"Like an intervention?" Ward laughed until he saw Dexter's anger grow. He tried to cover with a cough. "Excuse me, must be coming down with something. Sure, I'm free tomorrow afternoon."

"I've got a group project. It'll have to be after dinner."

They arranged to meet at Charlie's bungalow and both promised not to alert him beforehand.

*****

The October night fell quickly and a crisp wind forced Dexter to pull his parka hood up over his head. He could see Wade in the distance stomping his feet to keep warm.

They walked in silence until they turned down Charlie's street. What they saw made them stop in their tracks.

"What the hell?" Wade managed to mumble.

A swarm of clouds swirled above the small brick house. The bungalow, which had been picture perfect when Charlie moved in, seemed to sag and droop. The lawn looked as if it had been scorched.

Ward shook his head. "I'm not going in there."

"You are and you will." Dexter grabbed him by the back of the neck and pushed him towards the door.

Dexter knocked but there was no answer. He tried the door knob and found it unlocked. The door swung open on creaky hinges.

The house's interior was unnaturally black. Not even the streetlights from outside penetrated the darkness. When the Pigg brothers stepped over the threshold, the door slammed shut behind them.

"Charlie?" Dexter called out.

"Well, he's not home so let's just go…" Ward began.

A lump in the corner moved. Ward stepped behind Dexter as the shape rose up before them. Dexter reached out blindly and grabbed the first thing his hand wrapped around, a fireplace poker.

"Stand back!" Dexter held the poker like a baseball bat poised to swing.

"You should have called first. I would have picked up the place." The lump wheezed.

"Charlie!" Dexter cried.

A flame sparked. Ward and Dexter shielded their eyes against the sudden brightness as Charlie lit candles with a kitchen match.

"They turned off the electricity a couple of days ago." Charlie shrugged.

"Hey, bro. What've you been up to?" Ward ventured.

"Communing with the ancient ones. Hastening their return. The usual." Charlie smiled, revealing brown teeth.

"Hey, man. Why don't we go out and grab a bite to eat? Maybe get a burger?" Dexter held out his hand. Charlie regarded it as one might regard an asp about to strike.

"I'm fine. I'm better than fine, actually." Charlie turned away, dismissing them. "So you can go back to your petty lives now. Go on, nothing to see here."

"So giving up on the White House, then?" Ward said.

"Shut up, Ward!" Dexter fumed.

“No, it’s okay. I don’t expect a small mind like yours to understand.” Charlie glanced back over his shoulder. “Why would I want to be a president, when I can be a king? Or an emperor?” His eyes lit up. “Or a god?”

The fireplace burst into life. A small cauldron hung from a metal hook. Dexter peeked inside and recoiled from the vile slime that oozed and bubbled.

“You should go now. It’s coming. You don’t want it to get your scent.” Charlie shooed his brothers towards the door.

The shadows grew and shifted behind Charlie. He suddenly seemed quite small. “Go now!”

As Ward and Dexter stepped from the house, the door slammed shut behind them. The wind picked up and blew leaves around them.

“That’s it, I’m out. You need any more backup, call mom!” Ward turned his collar up and charged into the brewing storm.

Dexter turned back to the house once more. He thought he could just make out chanting above the wind’s roar.

*****

Ward stomped into his house. The lights were off and an unnatural silence radiated through the building. “Anyone home?” Ward wandered through the rooms. “Where is everybody?”

The air felt thick and suffocating. Ward peeled his coat off. “Did you guys leave the heater on full blast or something?” He trudged up the stairs.

A thick slime oozed from the ceiling just above Ward. A long strand of goo dripped down. Ward turned and headed into a bedroom, the droplet barely missing his head. Smoke drifted up from the smoldering carpet where the drop landed.

Ward closed the bedroom door behind him and put his ear buds in. He cranked up his MP3 player and opened a book on sustainability. As he made notes in the margin, a thin, keening wail began.

Ward frowned and checked his MP3 player. The wails grew louder. Behind him, the walls rippled as if they were thinning. The wails escalated to a crescendo. Ward yanked the ear buds out. He realized the sound was coming from inside his room.

He hazarded a glance over his shoulder. The wall undulated as tentacles pierced the fabric of our world. Ward screamed and raced from the room. A crash sounded behind him as the creature pulverized his room as it broke through the barriers of time and space.

Ward half ran, half fell down the stairs and out of the front door mere moments before the house imploded. The keening wail rose again. Ward dashed down the road moments ahead of the darkness that engulfed everything in its path.

Dexter opened a beer over the sink and sipped the foam as it poured over the can's lip. A pounding at the door drew his attention. He glanced at the clock. "Charlie?"

A muffled, terrified voice howled from behind the front door. "Dex! Let me in!" The moment the door opened, Ward threw himself over the threshold and slammed the door behind him. He grabbed Dexter by the shirt collar. "You've got to help me, it's after me."

Dexter peeled his brother's fingers from his shirt. "Calm down. What happened?"

"This… thing. It came through my wall and destroyed the house!" Ward's wide eyes darted around the room, frantically trying to take in and assess every shadow.

"What thing?" Dexter maneuvered Ward to a chair. "What did it look like?"

A loud thud caused the entire house to shake. Pictures rattled on the walls and a mug fell off of an end table and shattered on the hardwood floor below.

"It's here," Ward gasped.

Another thud.

Something was trying to get inside.

Dexter eased himself along the wall towards the front window. Another thud. Dexter's body shook with the reverberations. He eased over until he could peer out of the window. Large tentacles twisted and roiled. Dexter squinted and just made out a face.

The eyelid snapped open and one horrible, blighted eye rolled in his direction. The wail resumed.

Ward trembled. "That's the sound it made before it smashed my room."

Plaster crumbled. Wood buckled. Dexter grabbed Ward's arm and dragged him to the back door. "Come on!"

The brothers burst through the door as wood splintered and filled the air behind them. They rounded a clump of bushes and a tentacle whipped out at them. Dexter pushed Ward out of the way as the tentacle knocked him off his feet. Ward helped Dexter up as the tentacle came around for a second swipe.

Dexter grabbed an iron-staked lawn ornament and ripped it from the ground. He plunged the sharp tip through the tentacle and into the ground. An earsplitting screech pierced the night. Dexter and Ward covered their ears as they rushed from the yard.

The tentacle yanked itself loose from the ground and swung the stake, still impaled, like a weapon.

The roaring fire provided the sole illumination of Charles's home. The flames threw shadows on the wall, not all of which moved as they should. Strange symbols were drawn in the dust and dirt on the windows.

Charles huffed and puffed as he carried the cauldron to the fireplace, now filled with fresh water. He opened the Necronomicon and chanted in a strange tongue. The words lifted off the pages and swirled around him. His eyelids fluttered until only the whites of his eyes showed.

Ward and Dexter raced in and bolted the door. The spell broke immediately and Charles glared at his brothers as they tried to catch their breath. "This weird octopus thing is after us."

Charles maintained a sense of calm as he closed the tome. "It's an Old One. And I know. I'm the one that released it."

Dexter stormed across the room and pinned Charles against the wall. "Why would you do that?"

Charles laughed but there was little joy in it. "Why does anyone do anything? I did it for knowledge and power."

Ward stood safely behind Dexter. "You sent it to us? It wrecked our houses!"

Charles gave his youngest brother a venomous grin. "You're my bartering chips."

Ward stared at him in confusion but Dexter's face twisted in rage. "You bastard."

"What does he mean, 'bartering chips'?" Ward asked.

Dexter's eyes never left Charles's. "What does he mean, Dex?" Ward glanced back and forth between his brothers. Charles winced as Ward's voice took on the whiney edge.

The wail issued from outside the house. Charles's grin widened. "My Lord and Master has arrived."

Dexter reached for Charles. "Then why don't you go to him." He hauled Charles across the room to the straining door. Charles chuckled and quickly drew a symbol on the door with his fingertip.

The attack stopped. The wailing died down and silence descended on the brick bungalow. Ward gawked. "What did you do?"

A bang sounded as the Old One thrust itself onto the roof of the bungalow. Charles pushed past his brothers and headed to the fireplace. He opened the cauldron, revealing a swirling mass of bile colored liquid. The Necronomicon fell open to the correct page as soon as it hit Charles's hands. Charles chanted in the guttural, ancient language.

"Stop it, Charlie!" Dexter reached for the book. When his fingertips brushed the cover he gagged and yanked his hand back.

Words and symbols took form and rotated around Charles like a tornado of evil. The roof creaked under the Old One's weight. A tentacle slid down the chimney and hit the cauldron.

Charles rocked back and forth as the cauldron pulled the Old One down the chimney. The bricks shuddered and cracked as the large creature found itself forced into the small space.

Ward found his voice. "What the hell is wrong with you, Charles? You're acting like a crazy person! You can't just bring some creature—" A tentacle pulled free of the chimney and wrapped around Ward's waist. He screamed as the slimy appendage dragged him across the floor. Dexter clung to his little brother and tried to free him but the creature's grip was too strong. Ward's body folded unnaturally as it was forced into the cauldron.

All the while, Charles continued to chant. Dexter strode over and punched his brother square in the face. Charles dropped the book. "Wait, Dex! If I don't complete the spell, the Old One won't be able to return to his own time!"

"I don't care!" Dexter hit his brother again. A sickening crunch sounded as the blow broke Charles's nose. Blood poured from his face.

Tentacles emerged from the cauldron. Dexter pummeled his brother, as years of anger and frustration flooded his fists and compelled him to strike again and again. Charles didn't fight back or say a word. His infuriating smile remained, even after Dexter knocked two of Charles's teeth loose.

The tentacles swayed behind Dexter as he stepped back from Charles, his knuckles raw and bloody. "Make it stop." Dexter said.

"It's almost over." Charles replied.

"Send it back."

"It will go back when it's satisfied."

"So satisfy it!" Dexter yelled.

"As you wish." Charles chanted and the tentacles stood stock still. Charles winked at his brother and said. "Nograh!"

The keening wail sounded as the tentacles engulfed Dexter from head to toe and hurled him into the cauldron. The large appendages twisted and turned as they worked their way into the tiny area.

A couple of the tentacles slid from the pot and inched toward Charles. He caught the movement and snapped. "Emshah!" The movement stopped. "I've given you two blood sacrifices. Now it's your turn." Charles kicked the tentacles and they slid back. "Give me the knowledge of the ages."

The creature rolled its eye to meet Charles's. As their gazes connected, Charles felt his mind open and expand. He could see entropy beach with the slimy creatures crawling out from primordial ooze. He tasted sulfuric air and witnessed the creation and demise of generations of species. The scenes sped up and increased in number. His tiny human brain fissured from the weight of knowledge. He howled and fled the house as the cauldron's contents churned faster and faster until they became a bright blur and disappeared.

The police found him, hair turned white overnight, perched on his front steps. He babbled and blubbered but no one understood his words. The bodies of Ward and Dexter were never found but the police always suspected foul play and Charles remained their prime suspect, even as he wasted away in Arkham Asylum.

THE FEAST OF HAMELIN

Carl Thomas Fox

"*It is one hundred years since our children left."*
Hamelin town chronicles 1384

The first thing that woke Marcus up was the bumping underneath him. He was sleeping, deep in rest, remembering things as a dream. The dreams of his former life, a musician, wandering to the great houses of Rome, earning whilst watching drunken senators and soldiers dancing and fornicating.

What a life he led.

But that was in the past, a lifetime ago. Or several.

The man once known as Marcus Vagadiscrepent was a wanderer again, sleeping on the wooden pallet he found in a foreign dock that was swept out to sea. Drifting for days, no idea where he was going, no food or drink, lost in his thoughts.

However, he was brought out of his sleep by a knock under the pallet he laid on. Coming to, he peered over the edge, seeing a few ripples on the gentle wave. Turning away from the ripples, he noticed that the waves were gentle, and in the rising dawn light he could see approaching land.

Another bump.

"I know you are there," Marcus sighed. "What do you want?"

With that, the bumping stopped. As did the ripples. Suddenly, in place of the ripples, a dark shape exploded out of the water, leaning on the side of the pallet. A humanoid figure,with thick, grey, hairless skin, a snarling mouth filled with sharp teeth, empty black eyes and a bony ridge running along the middle of the head. Behind the body, a tail splashed in the water. The thing was female, its breasts hung in the water, and the face was smooth and pointed.

However, even though it leapt out, Marcus showed no fear.

"What do you want?" Marcus snarled again.

"Master Croatoan summoned me to find you. Another payment is due." Its voice was hollow, no emotion.

"Where are we?" Marcus sighed once again.

"Just off the shore of Helvetia. Continue south, into Germania, continuing south, and you will come across . . ."

"Hamelin," finished Marcus. "So it is time already."

"You remember the assignment?"

"Yes, remove the rats to save the first son of the mayor. In return, the first daughter is given to us."

"Well, it is time. Now, go."

Showing the urgency, the sea creature gave the pallet a nudge, helping it drift closer to shore. Upon hitting the shore, Marcus climbed to his feet and brushed down his clothes. If anyone were to look at him, no one would think anything of him. A man of average height and build, shoulder-length scraggly hair and an unkempt mess of stubble on his face, an appearance he was trapped with. All he could change were his clothes, and all he had were tattered leggings and tunic, and a simple cloak. The only thing distinctive about him was a pipe he carried at his hip, like a sword.

Not needing food, nor drink, nor rest, Marcus walked. That's all he ever seemed to do with his life anymore, just walking, fulfilling his master's orders, no longer with a life of his own.

He remembered how he came to this, once a loved and talented musician, now a penniless wanderer, a beacon of death. He witnessed something he shouldn't have seen, whilst performing at a senator's home. Even to this day he still couldn't say, part of his salvation was never to speak of it. He ran from the house, hiding wherever he could. He was being hunted. The only chance he had was to climb aboard a ship as a stowaway. But even then he was captured, beaten and tortured, only to be thrown overboard. Near death, alone on the ocean, Marcus pleaded for his life to anyone would listen.

Croatoan listened, rising from the depths, giving Marcus this curse he has carried for years, with which he was to fulfil his latest assignment.

For days Marcus walked, keeping his head down, ignoring all who passed him. This was the only way he could handle eternal life, shut himself off from everyone. This was the only way he could do the things he had to do. He had to keep his mind focused on what was at stake. He was expected at Hamelin.

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Hamelin was bursting with life. Children ran round on the beautiful summer day, ribbons trailing them, creating currents of colour. Musicians

stood in the centre of the village, playing music (how Marcus missed that), and people were gathering, celebrating five years of freedom from the rats. Five years where plague and pestilence had not touched them. Furthermore, it was St. John and Paul's Day, and the church bells were still ringing in celebration.

However, a hushed silence descended the town the moment Marcus entered. He walked, his head down, ignoring all those he walked past. They knew him. They remembered what he had done. It was because of him that the rats were gone, but they knew nothing was free, there had to be a reason why he was here.

Marcus kept walking, heading for a large house in the middle of the town. All stood aside, letting him pass. Anyone he neared backed away, as if they would die from his very touch. A reaction he was all too familiar with. However, the man who greeted him at the door showed no fear, greeting Marcus with a hand shake. A tall, chubby man, with a red face, smiling and warm, a booming voice roaring from his mouth.

"Welcome back, Piper," he said, using the name Marcus travelled under. "We have been expecting you."

"My time is short, mayor," Marcus bluntly replied. "You know why I am here."

Without saying anything further, the mayor led Marcus into the house, into a large room that held a large desk and towering candles. An inkwell with quill rested on the table, next to which were piled a series of different parchments. No doubt expenses for the town. The mayor took his seat, a large, ornate, decorated oak chair, with exquisite and intricate designs, and offered Marcus the opposite seat, a simple stool. Marcus declined.

"So, what do we owe the favour of," the mayor said, once more acting the innocent.

Marcus never liked this man. After all, he made a deal, his daughter to save his son. Marcus just wanted this over with.

"Five years ago," Marcus began, "you summoned us, and we answered your call."

Indeed, five years ago to the day, Marcus had come to Hamelin. Here, the mayor, a secret practitioner of black magic, said he summoned the Piper to rid the town of rats. When he arrived, he could see the devastation. The streets were alive with rats streaming from house to house. Children were forced to share their beds and food with the rats.

It was disgusting.

Of course, because of the severe infestation, disease was rife.

The mayor was purely focused on the life of his ten year old son, whose legs showed the repetitive biting of rats. He asked Marcus to rid Hamelin of the rats, and save his son's life. In return, he would give over his twelve year old daughter, who the man seemed to despise. Nonetheless, whatever the man's reasons for doing so, Marcus accepted the proposal and set to work.

On that very day, Marcus went out to the town centre and pulled out his pipe. In wonder, people gathered to watch as he started playing a strange, hypnotic melody. Then, like a cascading wave, the rats rushed straight for Marcus. He showed no fear, just kept playing. Then, he started walking. As he played, the rats followed, a running stream trying to keep up with him, rushing out of houses, out of holes in the ground, trying to keep up. They followed him as he walked throughout the whole town, ensuring every inch was emptied of the rats. Then, he returned to the centre.

Here, through the middle of Hamelin, was the Weser River. It was to this that he walked towards, stopping at the bank, where he suddenly sped up the music. Instead of stopping next to him by the bank, the sudden faster music forced the rats to jump into the murky water, only to be swept away by the current. Like a cancerous sore spoiling the water, breaking apart and drowning as the current rushed them away.

"Now," Marcus continued, "I did what you asked. You now owe us."

"Not quite," smiled the mayor. "There is a flaw in your plan."

With that same oily smile, the mayor pulled out a large box from under his desk. From within the box, he pulled out a stuffed rat.

"You missed one. A pregnant female, found under my very desk. From under my desk I tell you as if you purposely left it there."

"Even here, I can see the scars of a trap. How do I know you hadn't already caught it before I came, and kept it?"

"I have never welshed on any deal I have made," the mayor snarled. "But you failed, leaving one right here, one that was pregnant, to breed further and start again."

"Yet, for five years, you have been free of rats. So, *in tempore, omnes oportet observare Tibicine*."

"What?"

"It's an old Roman saying. *In time, all must pay the Piper*. If you do not pay the price you offered, then I take the price from something else."

"ARE YOU THREATENING ME?" snarled the mayor.

"Merely a warning," Marcus calmly replied.

In answer, the mayor snapped his fingers.

Before Marcus knew what was happening, a rope noose came over his head. Within one sharp pull, the noose was tightened, crushing his larynx. In reaction, Marcus jumped to his feet, and fought, but the noose just tightened, forcing him to his knees. His face grew numb, the blood building in his neck, crushing his neck. The rope bit into his skin, with rough, unkempt bites. Then, a group of four thugs circled him, throwing strong, stone-like fists into his face and abdomen. Strength was leaving, darkness was spreading.

With him forced to his knees, the thugs dragged Marcus, kicking and spluttering, out into the town centre. Everyone was gathered, watching the spectacle. On the verge of consciousness, Marcus was hoisted to his feet, the noose loosened. Weak and disoriented, the world spinning from the rush of blood entering his brain again, Marcus saw the mayor walking to him. Two more thugs followed, carrying between them a large wooden barrel. The scratching coming from it was more than enough for Marcus to know what was inside.

"This is the result of five years," said the mayor, looking at the barrel with pride. "This is what we would have been plagued with if we didn't find the one you left behind. Now, they are for you. But, I am not a cruel man, you won't endure them for long."

Before it happened, Marcus anticipated it. It happened so fast. Moving as quickly as he could, to end this whole mess, the mayor pulled a dagger out from his sleeve and plunged it straight into Marcus' abdomen. With a grunt, Marcus felt the sharp cold pain of the dagger, and the gentle, waning, tricking warmth of his blood running out. The dagger was left in, just to prolong the bleed out. Then, showing little compassion, they lifted the lid of the barrel and threw Marcus in the swirling chaos of rats, whom swarmed over him, his body swallowed by moving greyness. To prevent any from escaping, the thugs quickly took the lid, hammering it closed, and threw it into the Weser River.

The people of Hamelin cheered. This man was a harbinger, a bringer of darkness. Now, he was no more.

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As the sun fell, and darkness blanketed the town, all went to their beds. Ready for a new day. In the Weser River, where no current flowed, a barrel floated, half sunken as water had trickled in. No scratching came from within, all occupants were surely dead.

Suddenly, as if it were kindling, a chick emerging from an egg, something tore itself out from the barrel, disintegrating it. Just an explosion of shattered wood and metal, dead rats and a lone figure, spluttering from breath, trying to keep afloat. Soon enough, the figure swam to shore,pulling the dagger out from his abdomen.

Marcus was alive. It was not easy to kill him, part of his contract with Croatoan.

However, he was angry.

Even though Croatoan would not have agreed with it, Marcus was going to give them an extra day. Now it was too late. It was time to collect the compensation.

Straightening himself up, his clothes soaking, stinking of the vile river, Marcus pulled out his pipe and brought it to his lips. He didn't want to do this, but there was no option. Taking a sigh, closing his eyes he began to blow. A soft, sweet melody, carrying over the wind, moving from house to house. Entering everyone's ears. For the adults, the music sent them into a deep sleep. One that they would not wake from for the next five days. In addition, it did the same to those who had been born within the five years since the arrangement had been made. This was nothing to do with them.

However, for everyone else, aged from six to fifteen, for that was the age of the mayor's son, the music woke them, forcing them into a trance. The music made them dance, moving with silent feet, leaving the safety of their homes, and they walked to the river, where they were greeted by Marcus. Not once did he stop playing, not once did he take a breath. He played and played, watching as children approached him, danced around him, all in their nightgowns, barefoot, until they were all there. A hundred and thirty of them, like dancing angels, oblivious to what was soon to follow.

Once all were gathered, Marcus, still playing the pipe, started walking. Compelled by the music, the children followed, dancing, moving

in a uniform line. Like this, they walked through the town of Hamelin, through the streets, past the houses where their parents slept, unaware of what was happening, and out into the night, behind the safety of their town.

And still the music played.

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For days and nights they walked and danced, and not once did Marcus stop playing. As they walked north, eventually leaving Germany, anyone who they came across immediately fell asleep, allowing them safe passage.

Because of the music, the children felt no hunger, no thirst and no tiredness. They just danced and danced, walking in the line. Even when their feet became bruised and cut from where they walked, all continued dancing, unaware. However, bodily functions still happened, their bed gowns stained and smelling, but none of it mattered.

When the final night came, Marcus was making his way up a towering cliff, overlooking the crashing waves below. This was where he was being summoned to.

With perfect balance, he weaved past jutting rocks, ignoring large clumps of grass and bushes, weaving along a narrow path. The children followed his very step. If any stumbled, the music seemed to make them rise straight to their feet, continuing this nightmarish dance.

Picking up speed once he reached the tall, barren top of the cliff, so he was ahead of the children, he peered over the cliff, still playing. Far below him, in the darkness, he could hear crashing waves. He could not see them, the darkness was deep at the bottom of the cliff, the full moon was behind him.

However, he heard something else. A savage snarling, one of hunger.

Without seeing it, he knew what was down there. His master. With his deep, glaring eyes, his far reaching tentacles, and that towering beak, opening like a flower to a mouth filled with barb-like teeth and hundreds of wiggling tongues.

Turning around, Marcus looked at the advancing children, bathed in moonlight as if they were travelling along the moon's rays. Dancing, oblivious to what was so to happen, unable to hear the hungry snarls of Croatoan.

The music sent the children straight to the cliff edge, one by one, tumbling over. Not one screamed, as the music prevented that. Not once did Marcus look to watch the falling bodies; he looked at the moon, losing himself in the light. Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see the children going past. He could hear the squelching far below as they landed into the hungry belly. He didn't need to see any of it.

That was when Marcus saw no more children passing him. It was finally over.

Marcus stopped playing the music, replacing the pipe back at his side. In his long lifetime, this was far from the worst thing his gifts had caused, but it didn't make it any easier. He was about to walk away, wanting to wander until he was summoned next, when he noticed something wrong. He expected it to be quiet when he finished playing, only the sound of the crashing waves. But he heard Croatoan snarling in rage. In his mind, he heard something else, Croatoan's voice, roaring at him with savage, mind ripping commands.

"Not enough! Not enough!"

What more could Croatoan want? A hundred and thirty children, that was the arrangement.

Turning away, ignoring his greedy master, Marcus was about to leave when he saw it. It really wasn't enough. He didn't give a hundred and thirty children. There were two children left, looking at him with fear. Two children who couldn't keep up, but attempted to nonetheless.

A lame child, struggling to keep up, but compelled to by the music. Then, a deaf child who followed, even without listening to the music, just following the other children, also trying to keep up, the music not stopping his need for food and rest. His hunger and tiredness was clear to see, unaffected by the trance.

They helped each other, backing away. Behind him, he heard Croatoan, demanding for the rest.

What was he to do?

In all of his existence, during the whole time he had fed his master's savage hunger, never had anyone been awake and alert. They had always been under the pipe's spell. He looked between the two pleading children, and back to the cliff edge, knowing his master was growing more impatient. Should he kill two alert children, awake and who knew of him,

then have to live with it for the rest of his eternity; or should he deprive his master and experience a torment of torture or being hunted?

He made his mind up.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the moon, sighing resignation. "There is no other way."

He made his choice. Now was the time to fulfil it, and forever be remembered as the Pied Piper of Hamelin, the Beacon of Death.

RED RIDING'S ZOMBIE NIGHTMARE

Gary Murphy

Little Red Riding Hood went out for a stroll.

After an evening in the forest, surrounded by zombies, during which she decided she would rather take anybody home than being alone, she invited a tall, nervous member of the Living Dead, back to her small, quaint woodland cottage.

She didn't ask him to sleep with her, not in so many words, but it was pretty obvious what would happen. It was also pretty obvious, as soon as they had both left the company of the forest's vampires, ghouls and wolfen and he had failed to take her arm or hold her hand, that this zombie –like most zombies in relationships– would be too shy, too gauche, too inhibited to do anything.

She sat him down in the lounge and prepared him a cup of chilled blood; she chatted to him about the dwarves she shared her home with –along with her best friend, Snow White– made him feel at ease, but after a while decided she was too tired, was positively bushed, and suggested he should sleep on the settee, alone.

Red went to her room, undressed quickly because it was quite chilly tonight, and got into her comfy single bed facing the wall, shutting her eyes clamp-tight so that she would not see the shadows cast on the grey lace curtains by the lamps burning on the wall outside.

As she started calculating the days till her nineteenth birthday, in a desperate attempt to keep her mind off the zombie in the next room, she heard him come into her chambers and moved over as he got in the bed beside her.

'You should trim your nails,' she nearly said, but was so pleased to have him there that she kept quiet and remained totally silent, playing possum, waiting to see what he would do.

Red was wearing a pink nightdress, flowery in design, but his hand managed to find a way under it, stroking her thigh, then her pussy.

She was surprised how gentle this walking corpse was!

He had a slow, easy, fondling touch, though his hand was cold, and his fingers worked their way slowly up over her hips to her left breast, his entire hand closing on it, sensitively caressing.

His other hand then threaded its way under her, pressed against the flat of her stomach pulling her towards him, making her feel tiny, vulnerable, in need of protection.

Now she felt him in the small of her back, but the sensation was weird, as though he were bloated, fattened up suddenly, as though he had a bigger belly, and this unsettled her.

Her eyes closed, she turned in his arms to face him.

As she touched his chin with her finger tips, she was so surprised by his softness that she opened her eyes– and froze.

The thick, coarse veins on the forehead and over the cheekbones glowed a luminous white, the eyes yellow as custard, the hair a cobweb grey, and though there was a kind of sensuality in the very calmness of the deadly expression, the instant awareness that this hideous apparition was enveloping her, that she was trapped in its translucent arms, made her react violently.

The puking came up suddenly and she felt her heart pounding against her lungs; she then realized that the shock was paralysing her, that she was going to pass out, and she gasped for oxygen and struggled to tear herself away from the grip that was tightening around her. She seemed to be losing consciousness and thankfully let herself slide into oblivion.

Red suddenly snapped her eyes open to find herself standing in the bathroom.

She expected anything now.

She looked at herself carefully in the tall mirror. There were no marks, no bruises, no scratches. She pulled at her skin, turned round and looked over her shoulder at her back; nothing.

She got up close to her reflection and examined her neck. Did she really expect to see a chunk taken out?

She opened her mouth and inspected her teeth, prodded her stomach, flexed her fingers. What happened while she was unconscious?

She examined herself carefully between the legs. Had she been raped? There was an oddly strange feeling within her, the sort of feeling after having sex with a man of genuine expertise in love-making. A feeling of sexual satisfaction. She had been somehow fulfilled. Had she had an orgasm while unconscious? Had she actually been molested by a zombie, an undead?

She poked her tongue out.

If she hadn't opened her eyes when she had, she might well have thrust her tongue into that feral, grotesque mouth, with all its slime and puss!

She couldn't have imagined it all, surely.

So what now, petite, blonde Red Riding Hood with the tight curly hair whose slim, slight young body was desired by men who never seemed to have the guts or bottle to take her: what now? She wouldn't invite anyone to her bed for a long time, that was for sure.

Though she had to admit to a perverse joy in the sensation that those cold, dead hands had produced, rippling over her body so sensuously.

Why wasn't she frothing at the mouth and going beserk? Had she enjoyed the experience?

'Hello, my lovely,' said the zombie behind her, making Red spin around on her heels as she caught its reflection in the mirror.

Red noticed the zombie's looks. Last night she hadn't just slept with a zombie…

…She had slept with a female zombie!

And Red was caught in its eyes. It was not as embarrassing as she might have expected, it was just a deep, concentrated look of intense desire. She had never stared at a zombie like that before –and this area was full of them– the look was telling her of the excitement she was feeling by just being there, naked in the bathroom with this thing. It was incredibly stimulating. And to her own surprise it was she who reached out to touch it, to put the palm of her hand against its dark breast, to stroke it sensitively with the tips of her fingers and run them down to feel its dark, slim abdomen.

Red fainted then, and when she awoke she was sitting up in bed next to Grumpy in the middle of a conversation she couldn't remember starting.

She hissed, "I'm afraid of meeting death face to face, Grumpy. I once saw this picture in a book. Death was tall, a black skeleton wrapped in grey veils carrying a scythe over one shoulder and pointing its bony finger at a grave, its skull's hollow eyes staring."

"But," said Grumpy, typically, "you fucked a zombie, and now you must pay."

"It was a woman…the zombie. A zombie lesbian."

Grumpy smiled knowingly, “Perhaps you’re a lesbian yourself. You enjoyed yourself, right – so you’re gay, so what? And you wholly enjoyed munching the rug of a female zombie with lesbian tendencies!”

You could tell Grumpy was Jewish…

Red glanced back over her shoulder and saw the female zombie, standing there, grinning, a drooling piece of green slime hanging from the right corner of its mouth, and then she knew, knew too well, fairy-tale characters had nothing to do with zombies, vampires, ghouls or…well, perhaps the odd, straying werewolf.

“It’s all a wild, magical dream,” said Grumpy, stroking her head, “Now, just close your eyes and sleep, my dear Red Riding Hood – or Snow White – or Alice – whoever your dreams will allow you to be…”

Silence. The young woman listened to the breeze, the distant, hollow laughter of the dwarves beyond the bedroom door, and all of a sudden she was asleep. She lay sprawled on the bed.

“There’s no place like home,” she mumbled as she drifted off, knowing she’d soon leave the World of Oz, or Wonderland, and wake safely in Kansas, with her dog Toto by her bedside. She repeated it three times…

“There’s no place like home…”

THE RED CARPET TREATMENT

Gary Murphy

She'd had no idea how she would feel returning to Dewswater after all these years. How long had it been…nine, ten years? Yes, ten– she'd been ten years old when they had sent her away to boarding school. Two months after her father's death.

She was in the car. Clare employed the funny yet little understood instrument attached to the BMW's steering-wheel, a device that enabled her to turn the wheel using her right hand only, her left arm still weakened from the stroke – the "cerebrovascular accident", as the clinically cold medical profession liked to name it.

Because the four-wheel drive had an automatic gear shift, she was able to keep her left foot on the metal rest, which came as a standard with the model, her stronger right leg doing its job of accelerating and braking. The BMW swept into a narrow, hedge-lined lane and picked up speed again.

How much had changed in her absence? She wondered. Not much, not much at all, she was willing to bet. Certainly not as the Lodge House was concerned. Built almost two hundred years ago, there had been few renovations carried out since, apart from the usual upgrade facilities– plumbing, mains electricity and the like, and certainly no additions, except for the "black masses" she thought with a smile. Apparently the place was once rife with them. But we don't want to go there. . .

Woodland surrounded Dewswater like a bad rash, yet it was still a charming expanse that invited exploration from outsiders. Clare wondered how she would feel about Gold Eire, the cottage she had once regarded as her only true home. She'd been away a long time and had changed. From what she remembered of her last visit, so had the cottage.

Clare Napier was twenty-seven years old, lean but not thin, of average height, with thick, tangled red hair –red, mid-brown hair– that strayed over her denim shirt collar at the back. She was green-eyed and her regular, if not beautiful, features were slightly marred by a three-inch scar on her right cheek and another descending from her lower lip, both wounds sustained in the car crash almost six months before. These events haunted her. She had been lucky that the visible injuries were not worse, airbag and seat-belt combining to protect her from serious harm as the car she was driving

ploughed into an unoccupied street café. The café was demolished, her estate car a write-off, but it was the blood clot in a cerebral artery that might have killed her, for the brain can react badly to having its blood supply cut off, even temporarily.

She was unconscious for seventeen hours, drifting in and out for ten. When eventually she had properly regained consciousness, her left arm and leg were paralysed and her entire body – not just her head – felt as though it had been pounded by a heavy-duty sledgehammer. In and out she drifted, breathing, breathing heavily, loudly, laboriously, her heart feeling fit to burst. And swallowing, that was like choking. Like someone was choking her with their hands.

Tina Klass was her name once. A nutter had been selling crisps and ice-cream in the theatre where the superstar was performing. Obsessed Tyler Stott, a renowned devil-worshipper, neo-Nazi type who was believed to have orchestrated a black mass ceremony whereupon he put a hex upon Clare –that she would suffer a terrible death– was investigated by the police over a break-in at the singer's home– had been working only feet from her.

Stott, who was 28, landed a five-pound per hour job selling snack food at London's Top Brass theatre despite stringent security.

Clare, who had insisted minders guard the stage where she appeared in the musical Cats, was devastated to hear he had slipped through the net. In 2012 he was among Clare's fans questioned by the police after a theft from a garden conservatory at her rented home in Notting Hill. No one was charged. And in 2009 he posed as a flower delivery boy and nearly got into her penthouse.

He had cursed her, committing himself enough to say she would perish violently.

Like in a car crash.

Or something, perhaps, much worse.

Then, of course, had come "welcome" news of Stott's suicide, discovered dead apparently due to an overdose of liquid-morphine. God she had seen that man in her dreams so many times, now standing as still as stone, hard and erect at the top of the red-carpeted, swirling staircase leading up to that imaginary balcony in that imaginary theatre, in another horrible world. His expression was one of total devotion. Love. She almost felt pity for him. Love? No. Not love. Just pity, and also, she experienced that brooding, cold fear, that icy terror when he smiled down at her.

She pushed the dread away and slowed the BMW as a sheep suddenly pushed through a gap in the hedge ahead of her. The animal stopped dead in the middle of the lane when it saw the approaching metal monster, it gave out a startled bleat.

Clare pushed her head out of the open side window and bleated back.

The animal casually turned away and began chewing at the hedgerow on the other side of the narrow lane.

It didn't seem to want to move.

At first the renegade sheep refused to get the message, but soon realized a fleecy rump was no match for a ton and a half of moving metal. It shifted position, champing jaws never leaving the food supply, angling its stocky body so that the BMW could squeeze by without crushing it.

"You ever heard of road rage?" Clare said, carefully watching the woolly backside. "All those bushes will give you a bellyache, fatty!"

Clare chuckled to herself and brought her hair back inside. A chaffinch swooped low into the lane, heading for the windscreen like a kamikaze pilot bent on self-immolation, zooming upward at the last moment.

"Cunt," said a frustrated Clare, stopping the car.

Why didn't she just keep driving?

If only, if only…

Clare had had moments like this –many of them– since her recovery. What had the crash done to her that made her different to everyone else? It had screwed her mind. Because right now–

The lane was no longer there. The sheep…no longer there.

The creatures poured over the lip of the top stair like a rippling river, a mass of blackness flowing from the greater darkness, hundreds of them, thousands, millions maybe.

Cockroaches, worms, maggots, leeches, spiders. A fluid multitude. Legions of black, scuttling bodies, all streaming towards her.

She was too aghast to scream, too shocked to move. They were going to crawl all over her, they would get inside her clothing, skitter over her flesh.

In a second they were in the car. In two seconds they were climbing her legs. She swatted them, squashed them against leather, her jeans turning darker with blood. But they were inside the material; they were crawling over her bare flesh. And –Jesus!– They were eating her!

She cried out as her forearm received a particularly nasty nip. Christ! It hurt! She slapped the back of her leg and felt something pulp against her skin. Others were scaling higher, she could feel them racing up her thighs towards her crotch. More bites, more nips. A stinging. Like a needle pushed into her ankle. Oh God, something on her neck, puncturing the skin there! They moved so quickly. And there was no end to them. More and more swept over the top stair, rippling over lower ones, a great tide of speeding spiders, all headed towards her, re-igniting the great conflict between fantasy and reality.

She felt their jabs, their stings, their bites– she felt them eating her!

Inside the BMW she rolled over in an effort to crush as many as possible, but still they came, a seemingly endless flood of them, covering her, swarming over every square inch, finding their way into her ears and nostrils and, when she opened her mouth to scream, into her mouth. The pain was enormous, terrible, like pokers, needles, pricking her skin, and she had to close her eyes as they poured over her eyelids. She rolled this way and that, hitting herself, thrashing, rising enough to press her back against her seat, killing as many of the little cunts as possible, squashing them so that they were no more than gooey bits of mush and gore that could no longer bite. It was no use though, and their stinging jabs were just too much to bear.

"I'm sorry, little sheep, I'm sorry…Tyler."

The urging pain. This time, in her heart, her chest.

And then she was no more.

Tyler Stott reached out for her hand and took it. And she took his. They were together. Forever.

A love destined for greatness, one that they would share.

Then suddenly, a vast array of exiting and colourful activity leered up from nowhere around Tyler and Clare, who now found themselves in dense woodland. This came from the debris of the woodland floor itself, a lifting of dead leaves and soil as though spirits underneath were nudging through. He held her hand, she held his. He squeezed, and she squeezed back. The ground, the disturbance in the woodland near Gold Eire wasn't only in one location but in several scattered, moving mounds, brittle twigs, discarded leaves slithering off them. Tyler murmured an inaudible question. "What the fuck…?"

Strange, ethereal pinpricks of glowing red light had begun to settle around Tyler and Clare in this dream-world, some drifting lethargically, others still.

Suddenly they rose as one into the air, dashing to and fro, some sweeping towards them, but retreating after a few feet in the way that certain animals might warn off their foes. A queer ringing sounded. Tyler's heart, the one he no longer possessed, beat one less regular than before as he stood and gaped.

Something he could not see collided into the other side of the bush they were hiding behind, forcing them to stagger backwards, surprised but not a little dismayed. His heel found a bump in the ground and he fell awkwardly. He floundered on his back and a high-volume, angry sound rose from him. She was no longer there.

But the nightmare within the nightmare followed. Indeed, it even preceded him, for Tyler began to see things ahead of and around him. He could see the amazing, red-carpeted, swirling staircase straight before him…

He looked past Lucifer, in his smart, neatly-pressed suit and red tie, and he saw the twisted, blood-soaked and fetid glory of the cursed and damned. He saw at last the Salvation that was non-existent, the crucified figure of Jesus nailed to his wooden cross, strapped with barbed wire, whilst nearby, a play-act of sorts as His disciples gouged out the eyes of a hanging Judas, exacting justice for the lowliest betrayal in mankind's history.

Satan waved an introductory hand to reveal the perverse effigy of the Lord.

"Do you see?" he questioned Tyler, his face tearing as he smiled. "Do you see what you get when you don't get your priorities right?" It tore even more.

A black network of spiky brambles appeared to be a shadowy tumble of rotting limbs and tortured faces, entwined bodies dead as the floor they lay upon, from which rendered the reddened eyes and whorls that invoked stretched, wretched imagery of lost souls, now seemed sinister. One of the great branches contorted to reach down for him, perhaps to grab him as he ran away, and crush him in a cruel embrace. Mouths grinned, called silently, eyes within ancient bark, black but watching him.

Tyler saw his way out.

He saw the staircase ahead and scurried at speed, running up its length until he tripped and landed at the feet of…

Unflinchingly, Satan raised his foot, brought it down and crushed the skull of Tyler Stott in a single movement. “Another one bites the dust,” he uttered. Turning, he looked over his shoulder once to survey the great woods, and noted mentally his desire to return to this area again, perhaps in the not too distant future.

But just as a tourist, of course.

Näcken
(a water spirit in the Scandinavian folklore)

Mathias Jansson

Who’s playing a riddle?
with his enchanting fiddle
In the midsummer night
bewitching my soul
the magic notes float from the strings
draw me deeper and deeper into the forest
closer and closer to the wild rapids

Trolls and elves sneak along the river
listen to the melancholic music
filled with wild old and ancient magic
while tree leaves whisper beware
go not too near

Behind the trees I glimpse
the young man on a rock in the stream
naked with a crone of leaves
playing the devil's fiddle
luring me to follow him
with his alluring melody

I struggle to reach him
the cold water holds me back
strong hands pull me
down into the deep darkness
to my certain death
In the cold clear reflections
I can see his true face
a horrible grin of an old man
a demon with burnt wings
playing on a fiddle of bones and guts
sitting on a pile of skulls

in the burning black river Styx

CINDY

Iesha S. Bogan

“Wash this Cindy! Sweep this Cindy! Cook the meals, darn the dresses, draw my bath, *no more!”* Cindy screwed the last shackle into place before tugging on it to make sure it held fast. It had been hell to acquire them, but she had, resourceful as ever. She adjusted the light hanging above until it shone on her step-sister. Cindy had a way to get herself out of this mess, but it would require sacrifice, on her step family’s part.

Drizella slowly began to wake up; there was a lump on the side of her head where Cindy had smashed a vase into it to knock her out. Her eyes took in the room and she tried to lift an arm only to find it chained. Cindy had stuffed her mouth with a bit of cloth, the edges tight enough to rub into the corners of her mouth. Drizella glared at her, but Cindy only smiled back.

“Let me guess, you’re going to run off crying to your mother when you get off of this table?”

She could see the girl smile that smug smile of hers even through the gag. She was on her in an instant, the knife in her hand slicing off the girl’s clothes and exposing her bare body beneath. Drizella’s eyes had lost their smugness, now her eyes were wide and terrified. That was better. She ran the knife down the girl’s body.

“Drizella, you tortured me every day since I was little. Pulled my hair, broke my arm, and stuck needles in my bed. That’s why I’ve chosen this death for you.”

Drizella shook her head, black hair falling into her eyes. She tried to scream, but she was muffled behind the cloth. Cindy ran the knife up to her heart before she tugged the cloth out of her mouth. She held the sharp point to the girl's throat who was shaking and whimpering.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Cindy, it was only playing! You know, fun and games. Besides it was all Anastasia’s idea! She hates you because you’re prettier than her.”

Cindy nodded. “Does she?”

“Oh yes. She told me so herself. It’s her you want. You don’t need to kill me!”

“Don’t I?” She asked.

She lifted the knife and plunged it into the girl's chest before cutting through her skin. She hadn't expected it to be so hard, so messy or so satisfying. The squishing of muscle and blood against the knife was enough to urge her to work faster. She finally pushed the girl's chest open and there lay the now still heart of Drizella Tremaine. She reached into the girl's chest and took it into her hand. She opened the glass container and stuck the heart inside before she carried it upstairs and stashed it away in the fridge. She washed her hands thoroughly before she heard the door slam.

"Cindy! Get me something to drink. Wine."

It was Anastasia's voice and Cindy couldn't help but to smile. "I'm coming!" She hurried to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of Anastasia's favorite red wine before pouring her a glass. She reached into the cabinet above the sink and shook the small yellow box of rat poison into the glass and stirred it until the liquid was simply a deep, inviting red.

"Cindy! Where the hell is my drink?"

"I'm coming!"

She placed the glass on a tray and carried it in to Anastasia before she kneeled and held the silver platter up to her. The girl snatched the glass and pushed her down with her big foot. She laughed as she drank deeply from the glass.

"Next time, move faster."

Cindy sat up slowly and watched the girl drain the contents of the glass. Slowly a smile began to spread across her face and then she began to laugh uncontrollably. Anastasia looked at her with a raised eyebrow and a sneer.

"And just what the hell is so funny to you."

Cindy smirked before she stared at her. "I spiked your drink with poison."

Anastasia rolled her eyes. "Ugh, mother used to say all along you were defective. Grow up and go fetch my…my…"

Anastasia began to choke. She grabbed her throat; her mouth began to cover in white foam. She looked at Cindy with shocked eyes. Cindy simply smiled and produced her knife from the pocket of her apron. Anastasia fell out of her chair to her knees and Cindy reached down, grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her down to the basement. Her breath was coming in gasping wheezes now, blood on her lips and down the front of her dress.

When she saw Drizella, she screamed and tried desperately to fight Cindy, she didn't get far though as her eyes began to bleed. "Cindy, why are you doing this?" Her voice was raw, her throat damaged from the poison.

"Why? You've always treated me like a slave. When your mother threw me in the attic, you were the first to take all of the things my mother and father left me and break or keep them. You cut my hair off and threw away my clothes."

"That…was…mother! S-she told me to. I-I was just a little girl."

"So, it was Lady Tremaine's fault?"

"Yes!"

"Good to know."

She pushed Drizella down from the table and set Anastasia in her place. As the girl's final breaths were drawn, Cindy cut open the top of her dress and traced her knife up to her heart. Anastasia's dead eyes stared at her as she lifted the knife and plunged it into her chest. She repeated the process that she had with Drizella until once again she was carrying up a silver platter to the refrigerator.

She cleaned up the living room, making sure that everything was back in order before she heard Lady Tremaine come into the house. She quietly walked into the kitchen and pulled down a heavy pan that she placed on the stove and turned on. She heard her step-mother's heavy footsteps as she entered.

"Cindy, where are Drizella and Anastasia?"

"They haven't returned yet."

"That's funny, I sent them ahead of me." She sat down at the table. "Fix me something to eat."

"Fix it yourself."

"Excuse me?"

Cindy turned to her. "I said fix it yourself. There's food in the fridge. You can heat it up yourself."

"Why of all the insolence. . ." She trailed off as Cindy walked out of the kitchen. Scoffing, she stood up and went to the refrigerator. There on the top shelf were two bloody shapes with little place cards. One said Anastasia, the other Drizella. "What?" She backed up and something slammed into her head. She screamed as it burned her skin and then looked up as Cindy straddled her with a pan raised in her hands.

"Get off of me!"

Cindy brought the pan down onto her head again and again. She hated Lady Tremaine the most. There was no reason to let the old witch say a word. “You abused me every day! Took my father away from me! And now I can’t go to a simple ball!” She bashed the woman’s head with the pan until she could see a mix of blood and brain leak onto the kitchen floor. She stabbed the knife into Lady Tremaine's chest and cut out her heart as well before it joined the others.

There was only one part left to Cindy’s task. She made a pie crust and cut up the hearts before mixing them into the crust and baking them. When they were done she carried the pie out to the garden and sat by the stone-walled pond. She cut into the pie with her fork and slipped a large piece into her mouth and smiled, satisfied. As she scooped up the second piece she glanced off into the distance.

“Three lives devoured, three hearts consumed. I summon thee now, I require a boon.”

She watched the ground shift and a woman pulled herself from the dirt. She shook the dirt off and brushed some off of her horns and tail.

“What is your favor?”

“I want a dress, glass slippers and a carriage to go to the ball. I want the prince to fall in love with me.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want? There are consequences to this choice.”

“I summoned you. Do as I say!”

The demon nodded and Cindy was dressed for the ball. She climbed into the carriage and made her way to the ball. It was a lovely evening; the prince fell in love with her on first sight. They had been married for six months before the prince began to suspect anything was wrong with his bride. He would catch her in the dungeon of the castle speaking to the rats and sometimes she would look off distantly, an empty grin on her face. He asked her about her family numerous times, but she would never answer him, until one day she gave in to his continuous pestering.

“Get a carriage and I’ll take you to meet my family.”

The prince was elated that she finally gave the okay. He called for a carriage and they rode to her house. As soon as they entered a foul stench entered his nose and he covered his nose and mouth. She walked through the house however and down a set of stairs. With dread in his heart and a lump in his stomach he followed her. The stench was even greater in the

basement and he felt like choking when he saw the bodies, one on the floor, and the other on the table. Both had been gnawed on by rats.

"Cindy…what is this?"

"These are my step-sisters. My step-mother is in the kitchen. I never bothered to move them."

"Did you do this?"

She smiled. "Yes. It's how I got you."

The prince was so revolted by what he saw that he fled up the stairs and threw the bolt against the door. He heard her at the door a few moments later. She banged on the door and screamed, but he couldn't let her out. She was a monster. He walked back to the carriage, climbed inside and rode away leaving her to rot.

THE RAT CATCHER OF HUMELSTEIN

Mark Slade

His eyes were small and as black as the coffee that was in Mayor Klasky's cup. The man that sat across from Mayor Klasky was frail looking, large black circles around those small black eyes, and a complexion as white as chalk. He called himself Vermer, and he was recommended by the Mayor of Suffolk, who had a terrible rat problem that was eventually exposed in the newspapers.

Klasky had sent for him to help fix Hanover County of their rat problem. Rats had infiltrated the small town known for their tomatoes and other produce. This was not something Mayor Klasky wanted the county fair to be trifled with. Especially since the newspapers would be there and this year, for the first time in twenty years, there would be television coverage.

Six months ago, the vermin just popped up and not just on the lower side of the county where fifty percent of the county population lived and were destitute—where vermin such as rats prospered—they started coming in the library and the Tri-County hospital in small armies. Before long, a rumor began that a two year old girl was attacked in her sleep.

They were sitting in Klasky's office, eating breakfast Klasky had specially ordered from the town cafe. A few minutes earlier, Vermer had waited for Klasky to make his morning trip to the bathroom. At that point, Vermer stuffed the eggs, sausage, bacon and two biscuits in his blazer pocket.

Klasky stuffed his fat cheeks with a danish and sucked it all in, his large jowls moved like a dancer gyrating its hips. Vermer watched with disgusted interest.

“So,” Klasky wiped his mouth with the sleeves of his bright pink dress shirt. “You understand my problem, Mr. Vermer?”

Vermer smiled, his rubbery lips stretched out in the shape of a U. “No mister,” he spoke with a Slavic accent. “I only go by my surname, Mayor Klasky.” Vermer took the napkin from his empty plate and wiped Klasky's chin. “I understand. . . completely.” He let the napkin fall to Klasky's lap.

Klasky snarled at Vermer. What gall! He threw the napkin to the floor. “Then you can get started!” Klasky sputtered.

“I said I understood,” Vermer wagged his finger. “I didn't say I would do the job.”

“Something wrong with the amount I'm paying you, buster? Half a million when the rats are gone. That's more than the county budget. I had to call in a lot of favors to raise this kind of money.”

“The money is good, Mayor Klasky.” Vermer said.

“Then what's the problem?!”

“I'm not. . . feeling the situation is right for me. Maybe you should call someone else?” Vermer licked his lips, raised an eyebrow.

“You conceited fucker,” Klasky said. “You are trying to extort more money—We don't have it! The county—”

Vermer raised his hand to shut up Klasky.

“Mayor, there is no reason to anger yourself. Remember, you are not a well man. . . your heart is. . . not well.”

“Don't tell me not to get mad, dickhead. You want more money!”

“I do not. . . require more money. I simply say. . . I do not care to be a rat catcher anymore. I am. . . tired.”

“You talk funny. Where in the devil is Humelstein anyway? I've never heard of it in this state. Come to think of it— I’ve never heard of it.”

Vermer smiled. His brown, broken teeth made Mayor Klasky sick to his stomach. “I am from south of here, near the state border. . . a very small town. Not far from Bradbury.”

Klasky scrunched up his bushy white eyebrows, taken back a little. “I haven't been through Bradbury in years.”

“You don't seem to understand,” Klasky said. “If people find out my town has rats–”

There was a knock on the office door.

A young girl of sixteen poked her head inside the office. She smiled. She moved a few strands of black hair from her big brown eyes, and said, “Hi, dad– oh. I didn't know you were in a meeting.”

“That's all right, Julie. Come inside,” Klasky said. The young girl trotted in quickly and leaned over the Mayor's desk. “I've got the money right here for you. Julie,” he fished out a roll of hundreds that would choke a horse. He handed it to Julie and she kissed him.

“Thank you,” Julie whispered.

“Julie here, is donating this money to a children's hospital fund, Mr. Vermer. You wouldn't want to donate to it yourself?” Klasky chuckled, his

chins made an ungodly bounce in time with his laugh.

Vermer made a slight nod. “No,” he said softly. “All of my money goes to my poor mother.”

“Why is that?” Julie asked, looking concerned. “Is she sick?”

“Far from it,” Vermer said. “She. . . uses the money to help others. Find shelter for other. . . children, so to speak.”

“Oh. I see.” Julie walked to the door, opened it. She turned to Klasky. “Thank you, daddy.”

“Of course, sweetheart. Tell your mama I'll be home by five.”

“Bye, daddy.” Julie blew Klasky a kiss and gently shut the door.

Klasky and Vermer sat in silence for a good amount of time, their eyes never meeting. Both were lost in thought. Vermer's thoughts were a bit happier to him than Klasky's. Klasky was contemplating a way to embezzle the town's funds before the scandal of rats in the produce story in the papers was written, and he most assuredly believed that there would be a story written that would ruin his political career.

Suddenly, without warning, Vermer stood. Klasky rose from his chair as well, taking his oversized belly from the top of the desk.

Vermer put his right hand out to be shaken. “I'll do it,” He announced. Mayor Klasky's eyes lit up. “You will?” He asked, needing to be reassured. Vermer nodded.

Klasky took Vermer's hand in his and they shook. But before the shake was over, Vermer said:

“Provided you give me your daughter.”

Klasky pulled his hand away. “Are you fucking crazy?” He screamed at Vermer.

Vermer smiled to himself, raised an eyebrow. “It is only business, and… I need…”

Klasky reached out for Vermer with both hands, grabbing hold of Vermer’s shirt under his blazer. Vermer pulled away and the shirt ripped a bit. He ran behind Klasky’s desk, covering himself by holding the blazer together.

“What you need is to get the fuck out of my office and out of my town!” Klasky sputtered. “If I ever see you again, you're dead! Understand, Creep-o?”

Vermer smiled, shrugged. “Then,” He began, raising an eyebrow again. “Our business situation is… done for?”

“You’re done for, asshole! Get out! Get out!” Klasky was out of breath. He fought the urge to fall out on the floor, and didn’t even sit down until Vermer slowly left the office. He sat in his chair clumsily, and loosened his tie to get some air. Klasky put his head in his hands and closed his eyes.

“I’m done for,” He said to himself, realizing, maybe this was a mistake.

***

Mayor Klasky awoke the next morning to strange music. It sounded like a flute of some kind, but it was off-key. It almost sounded like bagpipes. He rushed to his bedroom window and saw Vermer walking through the town’s main street. Trailing behind him were thousands of rats, a moving brown rug being rolled out in the street.

Klasky was overjoyed. He took his cell phone from his pajama pocket. He dialed his secretary and an elderly woman’s voice could be heard.

“Ginger?” Klasky said excitedly. “Call the media, the fair is going to happen after all.” He touched the screen of his phone with a stubby finger, laughed. “Everything is going to be alright, now.”

***

Six weeks later, Vermer appeared again. Klasky opened the door to his office and Vermer was sitting behind his desk, feet propped up.

Klasky shut the door gingerly, chuckled. “I was wondering if I would ever see you again,” Klasky waddled over to his desk, reached over and took a large cigar from a box. “Excuse me.”

“I have come to collect my payment,” Vermer said.

Klasky sat in the chair in front of his desk. His smile soured. He lit his cigar, took a few puffs to get it going. “You were paid. The money was added to your bank account after the rats were gone.”

“That is not what I am talking about.” Vermer said. “I’m not giving you my daughter, jerk-off,” Klasky stood in a threatening stance.

“I am talking about another kind of payment.” Vermer raised an eyebrow.

Klasky looked dismayed. “I…don’t get it…”

Vermer rose from the chair. His smile widened. His eyes became a fire red. “Mother will have more of my brothers and sisters— babies…” Vermer lifted his shirt under his tattered blazer to reveal a dark hole inside his pale white chest. “They will be very hungry, my friend.”

One by one, the rats exited that hole in his chest, chattering, twitching. It sounded like a bizarre chorus to a horrible song. There were hundreds of rats crawling out of Vermer, down his leg and across the green carpet on the office floor.

Klasky dropped his cigar and screamed.

The rats crawled up his pant leg and soon had covered his body. Klasky fell to the floor, tried crawl away. Little by little, the rats were taking bits and pieces of Klasky’s flesh and taking it back to their nest inside Vermer’s chest cavity, then leaving and going back for more. It was a cycle. When the rats were done, Klasky became a picked-over body of skeletal remains. The rats re-entered their nest. Vermer pulled his shirt back down over top of his naked chest. He straightened his blazer and went to Klasky.

“Payment is made in full….Thank you.”

****

Vermer found his way back to the abandoned garage under the apartment building in Carytown, twenty miles from Hanover. He’d had a bit of a problem during the ride back, his body was too full and his joints were becoming stiff. The man who gave Vermer a lift was an added bonus. As soon as he reached the garage door and opened it, all of his brothers and sisters ran out from under his shirt and scurried inside the garage. Vermer fell to his knees, weak. He picked himself up and entered the dark, dank building.

He heard a noise behind boxes stacked in a corner to the left of several bicycle parts. It was Julie, bound and gagged, trying to tell him something.

“Mm… Be patient, darling. Soon you will be my bride.”

He heard scratching across the garage's concrete floor. Vermer turned and saw a giant shadow looming over top of him. A long stringy tail with brown fur surrounding the top curled around Vermer.

“Did you bring me and my babies sustenance?” A voice screeched.

Vermer smiled. “Of course,” He said. “I am a good son.”

Magic Has Its Limits

Matthew Wilson

Cinderella, the poor dear has
been made prisoner by her mother,
who wished to keep the prince for
her daughter, one crone or another.

Mother threatened to lock poor
cinders up in the lonely tower
where the prince would not lift her
feet to the slipper and find his flower.

Appalled at being a slave, Cinders
went to the store, not her fairy friend,
for rat poison to slip in mother's favourite
tea, and send her sisters round the bend.

Now once a year, Cinders goes to
the grave of the cruellest woman she knew.
Wondering what part of herself she lost
to win her freedom and fix that evil brew.

SWEET LITTLE HOUSE

Gary Budgen

He promised to take her away. Imagine going off, he'd said, get away from it all. It was what being young was all about. She'd imagined their escape in an open-topped convertible, cruising along a beach road in the sunshine. But instead he'd led her to the outskirts of town, where the homes gave way to warehouses and industrial estates and then at last the wood.

He pulled her by the hand, almost yanking her forward through the trees. At first they were on an official path, tarmacked, the undergrowth along its edges only just encroaching, only just crossing the boundary.

"Where are we going?" Greta asked, "I don't want to get lost."

All her life she had felt lost, an orphan, not wanted by anyone until she'd met Hans. She couldn't believe that anyone so good looking would take an interest in her; the girl from the care home. The girl nobody wanted.

"It's okay," said Hans, "There's a house…"

But soon they had left the reassuring tarmac and it seemed to Greta they were just stumbling through the woods in whatever way they could, going where the trees let them, between thick trunks and branches, tripping on roots.

It was dark beneath the canopy, the leaves dimming the sunlight. She followed him now, no longer holding hands. He went ahead of her, always looking at the ground. Occasionally he would stoop as though picking something up. Once she saw him push a white bottle top into the pocket of his combat trousers.

"Ouch."

Her foot suddenly buckled and she fell. One of her heels had broken. She had worn these high-heeled shoes because she thought that he would like them but when she'd arrived at their meeting point, in the deserted car park of the boarded-up pub, he'd looked her over and frowned. She thought she'd looked good: high-heels, short summer dress with a flower pattern, lipstick the red of blood.

"You'll have to be careful with those," he'd nodded at the shoes.

And he'd been right.

As she got up she saw that he was some way ahead. She called out and rubbed her ankle then, picking up the broken shoe, she went after him.

“Greta,” he called, “come on, we’re here.”

She half-hopped towards him and then the woods gave way to a clearing. She winced for a moment in the sunshine and then saw.

The sweetest little house.

It was a single storey cottage, although Greta was not quite sure how old. The roof was thatched with golden straw and the frontage was painted candy pink.

Once again Hans grabbed her and pulled.

“Come on,” he said.

“What is this place?”

It should not be here, surely? This was just some scraggy old wood, some bit of land left that hadn’t been built on because of an oversight in the council. Yet as they approached the house she felt something. Perhaps it was the way the sunlight caught on the golden roof, the lovely pink façade that made her want to touch it, taste it. For a moment an incredible sweetness filled her mouth, her nostrils. She felt sweat on her face, her hand and on Hans’s hand, so that she pulled her own free of his and wiped it down the thigh of her dress. Her vision was filled with the sweet pinkness of the house, so lovely.

Just before she fell to the ground and lost consciousness she saw the windows, the black glass like the surface of a deep lake. And she saw the hideous face of an old woman there.

When Greta awoke she thought she was still looking into the dark windows of the house, the deep blackness that went down into nothingness. She tried to cry out but there was something in her mouth. She was gagged. The darkness drew back and she saw that it was not windows she had been looking into but the eyes of an ancient woman who was bending over her.

Greta tried to sit up but found that she was tied down. She managed to look around a little. She was roped to a table in the kitchen. Nearby was a stove with a copper kettle and a heavy black flat iron. Beyond the old woman she could just make out someone else.

“Well,” said Hans’s voice, “is she the one you wanted?”

The face of the woman still loomed over Greta, the black eyes set in the rough skin, the thin lips above a gnarled chin where there was a wart out of which stuck a single hair. The woman slowly bought her hand down and

touched Greta's leg with icy fingers. Then she bought her face close to Greta's crotch and took a deep breath.

"Oh yes," the woman said, "I'm sure of it. Such smooth skin. And so clean. I can smell the soap. And you say she's intact?"

"She says she's never done it," said Hans, "that I would be the first."

Greta tried to scream and struggled. What had Hans done? Who was this woman?

Then she felt the woman touching her again, running those chilling fingers up her legs and under her skirt before suddenly pulling away, turning and snarling at Hans.

"Well if she says she's never done it, why shouldn't you believe her? Why do all you men think that women lie all the time?"

"I don't. I…" Hans stammered a moment and then came forward so that Greta could see him. Greta could feel her eyes widening, imploring him. He did not look at her.

"Shut up," said the woman to him.

Then she looked back at Greta and reached out and began to stroke Greta's hair. For a moment Greta tried to shake her off but the touch was gentle and Greta realised that the depths in those black eyes might harbour not only something fearful but something mysterious and powerful.

"Madam," Hans was saying.

"What?" said the woman.

Greta could see Hans, could see that his hands were slightly trembling at his side.

"We had a deal remember?" he said. "My wish. You said you'd grant me my wish."

For a moment the old woman's eyes lingered on Greta, then she turned to Hans.

"Yes," she said, "what was it? To never grow old."

"Yes," said Hans, "oh yes." There was ecstasy in his voice, almost hysteria.

And the old woman picked up the flat iron from the stove and swept it round into the side of Hans's head.

"Silly wish," she said.

The woman took off the gag and Greta took deep breaths, unable to speak. As she slowly untied the rope, the woman's soft voice told Greta to be

calm, and that everything would be all right.

"Hans…" Greta said.

"Now don't fret," said the woman as she helped Greta down, "he would happily have sold you to me to get what he wanted."

Greta looked down at Hans, his great strong body, his face still lovely even though the gash at the side had spread a bloody pool across the floor.

"To be young forever," said the old woman, "He thought he was being clever. But immortality don't work like that. You have to pay the price. Look at me."

"What do you mean?"

She looked at the woman, whose ragged skin and wart certainly indicated an old age but…

"I'm nearly four hundred," said the woman. "I age slowly but I age all the same. But I can't complain." And she clapped her hands and sang. "Life is sweet, the house is sweet. Because the *meat* is sweet."

Greta looked at Hans and the woman followed her gaze.

"Well I guess Hans will stay young forever now won't he?" said the woman.

"Yes," agreed Greta. She thought for a moment she might cry, but she didn't.

"Lovely young flesh," said the woman.

"I suppose…"

Greta was trying to take it all in.

"And now that he has bought you back, my lovely daughter, we can begin…."

Daughter? Greta grabbed on to the table edge to stop herself from falling. All her life she had been alone, not known where she had come from.

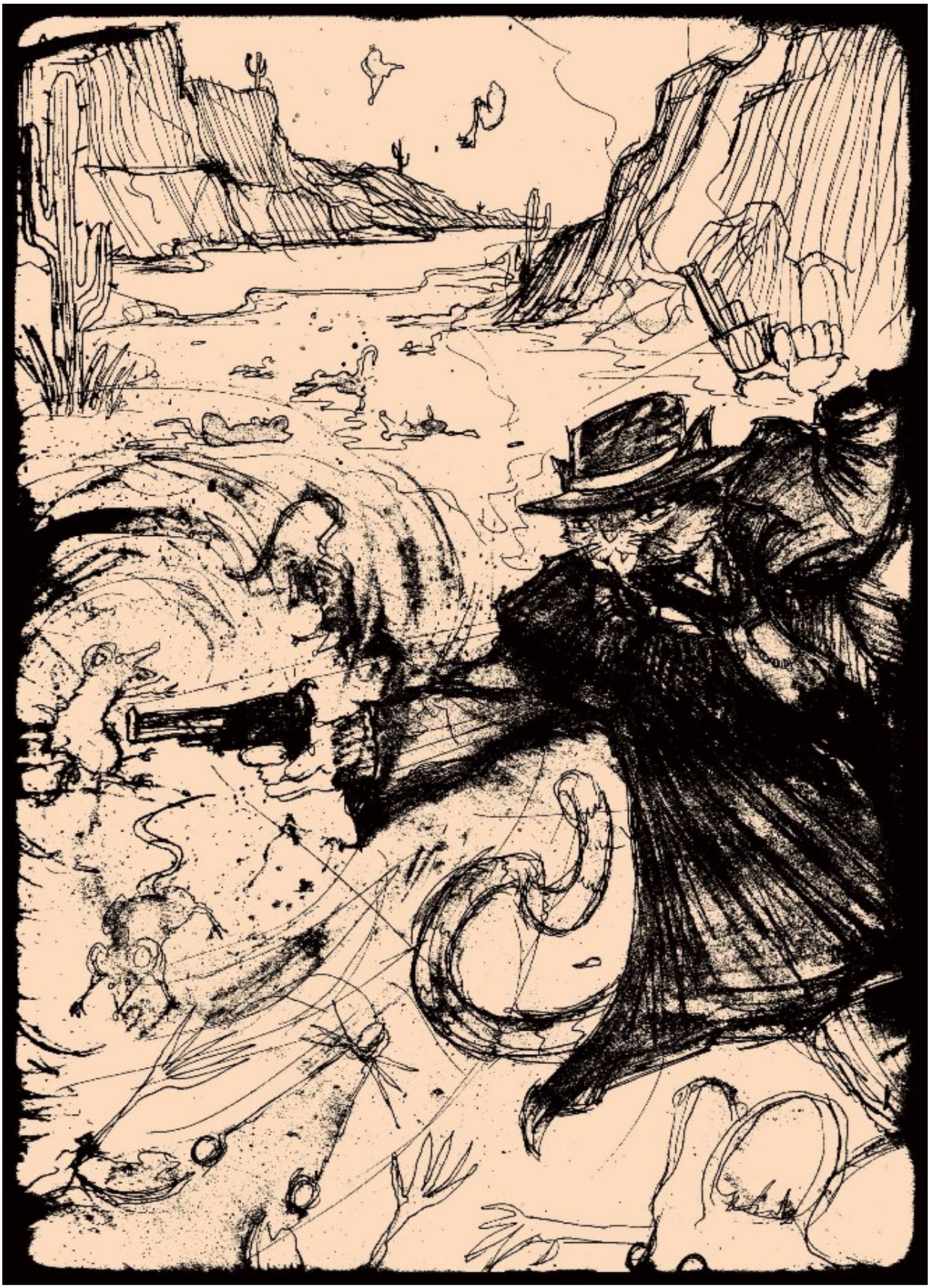
"Can it be true?" she said.

"Oh yes." And the woman held her arms open and smiled.

Greta rushed into her embrace and then old woman spoke ever so gently.

"What a feast it will be now that we are together again."

And she greedily eyed the body of the man on the kitchen floor.



MEET THE AUTHORS:

Angela Meadon's short stories can be found in numerous anthologies, her novel about the zombie apocalypse with a dash of psychological terror was published in December 2012. Angela lives in Johannesburg, South Africa with her two sons, her cat, and a husband who rick-rolled her at the altar on their wedding day.

You can catch up with Angela on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/AngelaMeadon) or on her website (http://meadon.co.za/).

Tera Fulbright has been a fan of the SF genre since first reading C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* in the 4th grade. She has five short stories published in a variety of anthologies (Her latest is "Fires within the Blank Page" published in Urban Fantasy: An Anthology.) and is working on her first novel. In her non-fandom life, Tera works as at the Center for Creative Leadership. And in what, admittedly limited, spare time she has, she enjoys running conventions (www.con-gregate.com), costuming (pirates, steampunk and Star Wars), miniature painting, playing D&D/Pathfinder, reading and spending time with her husband (James) and daughter (the Geeklet) at their home in Greensboro, NC. You can reach Tera through www.terafulbright.com.

Iesha Bogan is a mom of three living in Michigan. She has two mischievous and adorable little girls and one chubby little son. She enjoys reading books that make her afraid to sleep and writing every chance she gets. She hopes one day to make writing her day job. Her fiancé is often the inspiration for her stories as he lets her creep him out with odd tales.
Aside from writing Iesha likes to play video games with her fiancé, chat about writing with her friends and watching true murder mysteries and paranormal television shows. She enjoys cooking as well as baking and aspires to one day own her own restaurant. She also likes to listen to classical music in her free time.
Iesha aspires to one day be a published author to provide enjoyment to fellow readers. Aside from horror she likes to write paranormal romance, fantasy and things that have yet to be defined. She enjoys laughing and having a devious mindset which often influences her writing. When it comes to reading she likes everything from comedic science fiction to surreal fantasy to comedy and true life mysteries and biographies. Iesha loves to research and can spend hours in a library or on the computer researching her latest topic of interest.

http://ieshab.wordpress.com

https://www.facebook.com/IeshasWriting

Born 29th January, 1969, **G. K. Murphy** (or Gary), lives in Egremont, West Cumbria, UK, where he writes full-time. He is the author of the 'Wide Awake and Dead' Series of anthologies, and collected works 'Spawned by Eden', vampire novella set in a small Cumbrian village-like town, 'BloodZone', and new and recent pirate/horror novella 'Hellish Redcap'. He is currently studying for a BA Honorary degree in History, tries his hand at electric-guitar, and produces electro-transient beats with the help of an ancient and rickety MicroKorg synth. Gary fantasizes about the day one of his books, or short stories, gets adapted for television or film, and often pens screenplays with this in mind. In the meantime, he maintains he will write more and more horror, until the day comes he cannot write any more. Many of his stories can be found within the folds of many Horrified Press publications, as well as other publications, books, magazines, and webzines such as Schlock, who have featured him a lot online. Gary can be located on Facebook as simply 'Gary Murphy', or emailed at gazvespa69@hotmail.com

He welcomes fans new and old and is always willing to chat. Feel free to get in touch.

James Pratt writes depressing stories about gods, monsters, and the end of the world. H.P. Lovecraft is his spiritual advisor, but he also likes strong characterization, two-fisted tales, and maybe even the occasional quasi-happy ending. James has written over seventy short stories, a short weird western novel intended to be the first in a trilogy, and started a handful of novelettes patiently waiting to be finished. His stories have appeared in various anthologies including Demonic Visions 1 and 2 and Canopic Jars: Tales of Mummies and Mummification. James has three short story collections available for download on Amazon and Smashwords, all of which will hopefully soon be available in paperback too. James continues to write short stories, is currently working on an alternate history short story that imagines an America where Nikola Tesla replaced Thomas Edison as modern history's most famous inventor, and hopes to one day finish a fantasy novel incorporating Lovecraftian gods and races that he started many moons ago. James can be found at:

Blogspot: http://jamesdpratt.blogspot.com/#
Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/James-Pratt/e/B005BZIT3O/ref=ntt_athr_dp_pel_pop_1

Born and raised in Swansea, **Carl Thomas Fox** lives with his fiancé, Samantha Smith, and their two daughters, Amelia and Nevaeh. Carl also works with children, a teaching assistant in the reception area of a primary school, in which he runs a creative writing club to help children write stories.
Carl has written several short stories and several novels, including children's picture books and is creating vast mythologies and many languages, done as full dictionaries with every word able to translate with letters and numbers. Primarily of horror, but also of thrillers, science fiction, sword and sorcery and fantasy and children's novels and picture books.
As a pagan with a deep interest in the occult and ancient mythologies, Carl tries to use as much of this as he can in his writing. All his stories will be part of what is known as the Wellworlds mythology. A singular mythology that all work focuses on, almost mirroring the Norse idea of Yggdrasil, the tree that all worlds are connected to. This is a life-long work that he is deeply focused on.
If you wish to read one of Carl Fox's novels, he had placed one on Facebook a while back. It is called The Wolf God, a horror novel about werewolves searching for the final solution. You can find him on Facebook at carl.fox.5454@facebook.com.

Before pursuing her passion of writing horror and dark fantasy fiction, **Ann K. Boyer** dedicated over ten years as a paralegal in the dramatic and, at times, horrifying field of family law. She lives in Frisco, Texas, with her husband and two daughters, and is currently pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in English and Literature, with an emphasis on Fictional Writing, at Southern New Hampshire University. Several of Ann's micro- and flash-fiction stories can be found online at www.MicroHorror.com, in *Blood Reign Lit* Magazine, and on www.99Fiction.net, where she spotlighted as their "Featured Writer". Ann also has short stories published in the online anthology *Horror D'oeuvres* by DarkFuse Publishing, in an upcoming issue of *Nightmare Illustrated* by Horrified Press, with illustrations provided by Luke A. Spooner of Carrion House, and the highly anticipated anthology *Chiral Mad 2* by Written Backwards Press. You can follow Ann on Facebook, @AnnKBoyer on Twitter, as @Mrs_Split_Personality on Instagram, and through her blog www.annkboyer.com.

Christofer Nigro is a lifelong fan of the interrelated genres of horror, sci-fi, fantasy, suspense, and crime noir in any conceivable medium, including prose, cinema, comic books, and video games. His short fiction in the above genres has appeared in anthologies and eZines published by Black Coat Press; Sirens Call Publications; Scarlett River Press; Pulp Empire; and Grinning Skull Press, with work accepted in upcoming anthologies by Angelic Knights Press; Chupa Cabra House Press; and Pro Se Publications. He is now feverishly at work on three novels, two in the super-hero genre for

Metahuman Press and one in the pulp fiction noir & adventure genre for Black Coat Press. Some of the work he is most fond of producing includes short stories featuring the French pulp fiction characters Judex; the Nyctalope; Felifax the Tiger Man; and the Phantom of the Opera for Black Coat Press in that publishing house's annual *Tales of the Shadowmen* anthology, and singular anthologies such as *Night of the Nyctalope* and *The Shadow of Judex*; along with creating the Martian warrior Cy Tharnn for Pulp Empire's *Aliens Among Us* anthologies. He maintains several websites of relevance, including The Godzilla Saga; The Warrenverse; MONSTAAH; & Wold Newton Beyond.

Mark Slade has had stories published with *Burial Day Books*, *Wordhaus*, *Blood Moon Rising*, and is in vampire anthology, *You can't kill me--I'm already dead*.
He runs the short story podcast *DARK DREAMS*, is co-editor of picto-fiction magazine *Nightmare Illustrated*, and his latest book (*A Six Gun and the Queen of Light*) has just been released by Horrified Press.
He lives in Williamsburg, Va, with his wife and daughter.

Rita Dinis, pseudonym of Ana Luisa Oliveira, published her first book – *Isoforma* – in 2011, volume one of her Vampire Series originally written in her native language: Portuguese. The second book is currently in progress and she has several plans for upcoming series, both in Portuguese/English. Currently, she's had a variety of short-stories published in various horror/terror anthologies. Writing for anthologies is one of her addictions, along with killing zombies and mutants with a rifle gun on her Wii console. She is a biologist and an M.D: Medicine and writing edgy fiction are her passions. For her, writing comes as naturally as a mushroom growing by the roadside. She currently lives and works as an M.D. in Southern Portugal, in her home city with her family.
If you want to know more about the author, try:
http://ritadinisinternational.webs.com, http://ritadinis.webs.com
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